Longtime leader

On a snowy evening in February, Patricia Simmons is at the Capitol in St. Paul. Although she’s an expert in pediatric and adolescent gynecology, she’s not there to testify about a health-related issue. Nor is she there to report on the progress of the Destination Medical Center Corporation (she helped create its development plan for Rochester) or to gain support for the arts (she’s on the boards of several arts organizations). This day she’s wearing her University of Minnesota regent hat. Simmons is waiting to see if she once again will be nominated to serve by the higher education committees. “The way it works is, I’m an active regent until the minute the Legislature elects my replacement,” she says.

Most regents step down after two six-year terms, and that was Simmons’ intent until a finalist with health care expertise withdrew and she was asked to reconsider. Simmons has already served two terms and is willing to do a third, if elected. She knows only that lawmakers will be voting on who will fill the slot some time during this session.

Whether she continues on as a regent isn’t the only unanswered question for Simmons. By choice, not all of her plans are firm. She’s just retired from Mayo Clinic and has stepped down from chairing the board of the Destination Medical Center Corporation’s Economic Development Agency (EDA). As its first chair, she oversaw creation of the plan for spending the millions of dollars the state is pumping into the region. Although she’s got ideas about what’s ahead, she’s taking a little time to see how the next phase of her life unfolds and how she can best contribute.

This is new for Simmons, who throughout her career has found herself leaning in more often than sitting back. For example, she’s chaired the board of Mayo Clinic Ventures, been its executive medical director for health policy and served on its boards of governors and trustees. She’s been on the boards of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, Minnesota Business Partnership and Minneapolis St. Paul Regional Economic Development Partnership. She’s been an elder at her church and president of her professional society, and she currently sits on the boards of Minnesota Public Radio, American Public Media, the Guthrie Theater and the St. John’s University’s Hill Museum and Manuscript Library.

Those who know Simmons say there’s a reason she so often gets asked to lead. She’s good at it. Dawn Davis, MD, who has known her for 15 years and considers her a mentor, says Simmons has qualities that make her effective. “She’s able to mentally juggle multiple situations at once and anticipate how they will inter-twine,” she says. “She’s also very visionary. Patty can think in the future with regards to a project, whether it be tomorrow or next week or next year or 10 years from now.”

Davis also says Simmons has that less-tangible quality of charisma. “She has an aura. It’s not like she puts on a show or tries to prove herself. She just has a natural grace and presence and magnetism that draws people to her.”
CONVERSATIONS | SHORT TAKES

Sri Zaheer, dean of the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management and an EDA board member, says Simmons is a “natural bringer-together of people.” “She’s very good at persuading people, making sure everyone’s opinions are heard, and yet keeping things moving along and on time,” she says.

Simmons thinks her ability to keep the mission in sight is what makes her an asset to the organizations she works with. We recently asked her about that and what it takes to be a leader. Here’s what she had to say.

What do you think it means to lead?
I think it takes an extraordinary commitment to mission in the nonprofit world. Maybe that’s true in the for-profit world, too. Whatever level I’m functioning at, I keep my eye on the mission. I keep a strong sense of the values of the group, and I make sure there are commonly held principles as you keep everybody moving forward. Leadership is not just letting things roll along, it’s facilitating the moving forward.

I honestly think one of the most important things a leader can do is help others succeed. If you’re on a governing board, you help the president or CEO succeed. If you’re in a leadership position in your department, you help those more junior or newer with their responsibilities. I love doing that.

Is leading a form of mentoring?
It’s more than that. It’s providing opportunity, guidance and support. It’s helping change course when the course needs to change.

What does a good board chair need to do?
Keep people well-informed, keep yourself well-informed about what people are thinking. It’s getting the ideas generated. It’s lots of one-on-one work. Good boards have leaders who are working with each member of that board. It’s the phone calls, it’s the coffee, it’s the outside meetings. It’s so much more than leading a board meeting or a committee meeting.

Why is that one-on-one work so important?
Human beings are so wonderful because there are differences in the way we think, work and function. You’ll have some people who are highly effective at getting things out on the table at a board meeting. You’ll have other people who may be more passive at the meeting but who have really important ideas, experiences and perspectives to share. And you don’t get that if you just hold board meetings. You want to get as much out of your board as you can, and your board will like that because everybody likes to feel valued, and they’re valued if they’re contributing.

How did you learn about leadership and governing?
Most of it has been on-the-job, being given responsibility and working hard to learn how to execute. With each new responsibility, I’ve gone to leaders across the nation and learned from them.

Have you ever felt intimidated by them?
People who’ve agreed to meet with me are good people who care about the work, the field, the community. They’re people who are willing to share their knowledge and expertise. It’s not intimidating, it’s exciting.

You seem to have a very positive attitude. Do you work at that?
That comes by nature. I don’t expect that things will always go well, but I stay optimistic because I know you generally get there and because I work with accomplished people.

What is the connection between practicing medicine and leading?
When you’re a physician you care about people; you think about how your decisions affect people. That never leaves me.

Are you looking forward to the future?
It’s been a long time since I’ve had the opportunity to say, “OK, what’s next?” I don’t know, but I like it. I have confidence that the next phase, my post-Mayo Clinic career, will be stimulating and exciting. – CARMEN PEOTA

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