

Presentation to Management Forum: Lessons Learned

I would like to thank the members of the organizing committee for inviting me to participate in today's discussion on Life-Long learning. When I was asked to share my story, I was humbled to think my career experiences may be of interest to others.

And then the decision, which career do I start with? Perhaps some information about my pre-work life: I spent the first fifteen years of my life in a very small English village on the Gaspé Coast. I came to Montreal to complete my final year of high school. As soon as I graduated, I started full-time work at Imperial Tobacco. So my working career started early – I was supporting myself at sixteen. That fall I registered for a six-credit evening course in the Faculty of Arts at Sir George Williams College.

The following September, I enrolled in a three-year Registered Nurse program at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Montreal. After graduating in 1963, I worked at the Queen Elizabeth and the Montreal Children's before joining McGill Health Services in September, 1967. By then I had married, had two daughters, one in 1963 and one in 1964, and was left a single mother before the second daughter was born. Back then there were no maternity leaves, no day cares – it was fend for yourself. I used my one-month vacation to have my second daughter.

In 1966, I decided to return to Sir George Williams University in the evenings to work towards completing my degree. My plate was already quite full – working full-time and with two little ones – but it was something I really wanted to do. I persevered, taking one or two courses a year. Finally, in 1978, I completed the 120 credits and graduated from Concordia with a Bachelor of Arts in Applied Social Science. I might belong in the Guinness Book of Records – not only did it take me nineteen years from start to finish, but the school changed its name three times while I was a registered student: from Sir George Williams College to Sir George Williams University to Concordia University!

I have many fond memories of my thirteen years working as a Nurse at McGill Health Services. I learned so much about McGill students during my time there. I was not only a care-giver, I was a teacher of wellness, I was a resource, I was a confidant and an active listener. As the Nursing Coordinator from 1977-1980, I had my first introduction to managing a team. It was good training for what was around the corner for me.

In late spring of 1979, the then Vice-Principal Academic, Dr. Pete Petersen called me to his office. He asked me if, in addition to my full-time nursing position, I would be interested in the part-time position of Acting Warden at Royal Victoria College (RVC) for a one-year term, beginning almost immediately. The previous Warden had resigned; the University had not convened a search committee in time to find a replacement. He said that it would only be for a year because the Warden and Hall Director positions at McGill were filled by academics. He wanted the one-year replacement to be from the non-academic sector so it would not look like he was parachuting an academic into the position.

He explained that it was a live-in position. He said that I would be responsible for the quality of life of the 266 students living in RVC during the academic year. I would provide support and leadership to the team of seven upper-year dons, the front-line resource people for the primarily first-year students living in RVC. He said he had approached me because he had heard that I worked well with students. It all sounded very interesting, so I cancelled my lease and moved into the Warden's apartment in RVC. RVC, then as now, is a residence for women only, while the rest of McGill's Residences are coed. RVC was founded in 1899 with an endowment from Lord Strathcona as a degree-granting College to further the education of women at McGill. But that is a whole other story; if you would like to read about the history of women at McGill and their struggles, Margaret Gillette's book *We Walked Very Warily* is a great read.

You may wonder about the title of Warden – it was borrowed from the British system and was equivalent to a lady Principal of a College. The early wardens were the Deans of Women Students at McGill. The responsibilities of the position evolved over the years to the point that when I started in 1979, RVC was a residence only, and the Warden was responsible for the quality of student life in the hall rather than the academic rigors. I will go down in McGill history as the ninth, the longest-serving, and the last Warden of RVC. My successor is called the Director of RVC.

During the course of that first year, it became apparent that I liked the job, and the job liked me. I really enjoyed living with and working with the students. I was invited to submit my application to the search committee, and in February 1980 I was appointed as Warden of RVC for a six-year term. Obviously, my initial six-year term was renewed; I stepped down from the position as Warden after twenty-five years of living and working with RVC students. When I left RVC in 2004, the staff and students honoured me by having my portrait painted and hung by the portraits of some of the other former wardens in the RVC West Lounge.

Living and working with the RVC students and staff during those 25 years gave me invaluable experiences and insight for my position as Director of Residences which I held at the same time. It helped me understand the issues they faced and hear about the concerns of staff and students outside of the normal work hours.

At the same time that the University was looking for a Warden of RVC, a search committee was struck to look for a Director of Residences. Once again, I was invited to submit my application. I was appointed Director of Residences in June 1980. In those days, McGill Residences was comprised of six buildings: five residence halls housing 1100 students and one office/cafeteria building. The budget in 1980 was just under 3 million dollars. Today, McGill Residences inventory includes thirty-two buildings on- and off-campus; 2700 students are housed in twenty-nine McGill-owned buildings and in one building leased from a private developer. The 2008/2009 budget is just under 30 million dollars.

My nursing background provided me with many skills that were very useful to me as I assumed this new administrative position. Nursing taught me so much: organizational, priority-setting and decision-making skills to name just a few. I needed all of them and more as I walked up the hill to an empty office in Bishop Mountain Hall more than twenty-eight years ago.

As I was preparing for this presentation and reflecting back on how I felt and what got me through those early days and years, I realized that what helped me most was just being myself and listening to the people already working there who knew more about the issues than I did. Just because my title had changed from Nurse to Director, I was still the same person; I was still Flo. The values and priorities that were important to me such as respect, equality, tolerance, fairness, listening with an open mind, hearing two sides, compromise and caring, were still important to me in my new position. They would frame my management style for the next twenty-eight years.

That being said, I had a lot to learn – about everything – when I became Director of Residences. My year as Acting Warden had given me a bird’s eye view of the McGill residence system but I really did not know what I was getting into. Had I known, I would never have had the confidence to apply. I did have the support of my superiors, which was critical. My predecessor had been Acting Director for a year; he was confrontational and not too popular, so luckily, the staff welcomed a change. Obviously, I did something right in those early days and years or I would not have lasted over twenty-eight years as Director. So another lesson I learned, in hindsight, is that you have to take risks, push comfort levels, and test yourself if you want to realize your potential.

I was fortunate to have a wonderful mentor in those early years. Professor John Southin was Director of McConnell Hall when I arrived in Residences. He had lived in Residences for many years and had even served as Director of Residences for a brief period. Although I had been working at the McGill Health Services for thirteen years, I had limited knowledge of the larger McGill organization, campus, and community. As many of you know, the McGill workplace can be very political. All this was new to me. John helped me understand the broader picture and coached me on many occasions. I remember telling him about one meeting where I felt attacked on a few fronts. He said “don’t worry, Flo, the dogs may bark but the caravan keeps on rolling.” I have repeated that to myself on more than a few occasions over the years.

John is but one example of the many wonderful people from whom I have learned so much. To learn from others, you must be ready to listen carefully, to accept the opinions and ideas of others, you must be willing and able to be self-reflective and self-critical, and you must be prepared to change your mind.

When you are in a leadership position, and every manager is, you are automatically viewed as a role model and in a perfect position to be a mentor for others. You may never know the impact that you or your style of leadership will have on others. I have frequently been named as a “mentor” and “role model” by the student leaders and junior staff that I have worked with. However, it took me by surprise that when news of my

retirement spread, I received some quite positive feedback about my leadership style from staff across campus with whom I had had minimal direct interactions.

I have previously mentioned that I consulted with and listened to those around me when I first started as Director. Although I was not aware of it at the time, this process of consulting with and listening to those I work with quite unconsciously developed into one of my management strengths. My staff have told me how much they appreciated being heard, having the opportunity to have input into the decision-making process. Again, another lesson learned quite by accident.

McGill Residences is quite a unique department on campus. For the eight months of the academic year we are primarily a “home away from home” for the 2700 first-year students who live in our buildings. We are a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week operation year-round. From May 15th to August 15th we run a hotel-like summer business for groups and individuals. The diverse Residences team of over 200 consists of academics, management staff and members of three different unions on campus, student leaders and various contractors.

I worked with a highly competent team in McGill Residences. I strongly encouraged everyone, both staff and students, to share their views and ideas, and to disagree with me if they wanted to do so. My staff appreciated the fact that I empowered them to make decisions, and they knew I would support them. It was a great compliment the first time I heard one of them say “I just asked myself ‘what would Flo do?’”

Our *raison d’être* is our students. We work closely with Enrolment Services to coordinate the admissions process which peaks on that third or fourth weekend in August when we move 2700 students into thirty buildings in two days! Prior to move-in, we spend an intense week training the Floor Fellows and Dons. Our mission is to provide a safe environment in which students can grow and flourish personally, socially and academically.

Students and staff have told me how much they appreciated my accessibility. My door was – literally – always open. It was important to me to know and understand the people I worked with – not only the direct reports, but as many staff and students as possible. Since I had staff working in five different buildings, it meant moving around a fair bit. By being visible and available in the various buildings, it made it easier for staff and students to approach me, and it enabled me to see and understand first-hand what the issues were.

I can only tell you what worked for me as I managed a growing department for twenty-eight years. As I said earlier, I was the same person with a new title and new responsibilities. I took those responsibilities seriously, but I did not let them change what was important to me. I am blessed with a positive attitude which helped my management style. I would look for solutions to problems, and I did not play the blame game. It was important to get the job done and done well – if that meant letting the other person win their point, so be it. I advised my staff that in many situations they should “take the higher road” – not waste energy and time to make a point. It is more important to focus

on the task than the roadblocks you are encountering in completing that task. I also managed by consensus as much as possible. The most important element of my management style was that I cared about what I was doing, how I was doing it, and the people involved.

Working with the students and staff in McGill Residences has been a wonderful experience for me. Not a day went by where I did not learn something from one of my staff or students. I'll close by passing on what I think makes a successful and competent leader: Respect is key. Keeping respect in the forefront as you manage and make decisions will earn you the respect of others. You must be authentic and consistent; people will trust you and know what to expect from you. And I believe you have to invest yourself into what you are doing – you really have to care to make a difference.

Thank you.

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