

2012 WEST Leadership Awardee



Ellen M. Zane
Former President and CEO, Tufts Medical Center

“Take risks! Stay focused! And do not listen to the noise!”

What achievement in your career are you most proud of?

When I came to Tufts Medical Center in 2004, the teaching hospital was at the edge of failure. Financial failure of Tufts Medical Center would also have repercussions for Tufts Medical School, which uses Tufts Medical Center as its chief teaching hospital. I believed in Tufts Medical Center and was inspired and energized to turn it around to its rightful place in the community. Tufts Medical Center went from the verge of financial collapse to being named The 2012 Most Admired Healthcare Company by the Boston Business Journal.

What advice do you have for young women in science and technology early in their career who want to expand their options?

I believe that what makes a difference for people is their ability to take real career risks. When I became the CEO of Quincy Hospital, there were eight days of cash on hand. When I went to Partners, I was responsible for the development of a provider network with the Massachusetts General Hospital and Brigham and Women’s Hospital. These two hospitals were once arch competitors and how they realized they had to collaborate on their cultural differences. It took giant strides to keep the status quo. There is no one quick fix. It’s a hit-by-hit approach. You can’t always be popular and you can’t break all the china in the closet either. You need to take real care risks. It’s what expands your options and that’s what people notice.

What significant obstacles did you have to overcome?

Conventional wisdom. When I arrived at Tufts, it was thought that there were “one too many” Boston hospitals and Tufts should be the one to go. We were able to demonstrate our value quality at a low cost. We had to remain focused and not listen to the noise in the background. Contrary to people’s conventional wisdom, we knew we could make Tufts a success.

What was one of your major accomplishments as CEO of Tufts?

A hospital is about what goes on inside the building. People come to hospitals because of great doctors. The doctors define the hospital. Tufts Medical Center has vastly broadened the network of doctors and their scope.

What mentor had the biggest effect on your career and why?

H. Richard Nesson, the founder of Partners Community HealthCare, Inc. and the former president of Partners Healthcare and Brigham and Womens Hospital. Dick called me out of the blue. Partners had a vision to build a huge doctor community. He brought me onboard as Network President. There isn't a day in my life that I do not think about him. He always asked how it helped patients. He plucked me out of Quincy Hospital in 1993.

Can you describe your career progression and what roles were significant in getting you to where you are today?

I do not have an MBA or a Masters in Public Health. I have a Masters in Speech Pathology. I became the Director of a speech, language, and hearing center. I then became COO and CEO of Quincy Hospital. Six years later, Dick called and I became Network President for Partners HealthCare System. In 2004, I became President and CEO of Tufts Medical Center. I am proud of where my path has taken me. It's important to take risks when opportunities presented themselves.

How do you balance your work and life?

There is no balance in healthcare. It's a 24/7 and 365 days a year job. You can't turn off the blackberry on the weekends. I am fortunate to have a supportive family. My husband Peter is supportive of my career. In terms of the glass ceiling, forget about it! Kill them with confidence. There are huge opportunities for women on the corporate scale! Take risks! Stay focused! And, do not listen to the noise!