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The Difference Between a Surgeon and a CEO

John Adler, *Accuray*; Trip Adler, *Scribd*

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A surgeon and a CEO are nothing alike, observes Accuray founder John Adler. A surgeon, he explains, gives orders in the operating room; a CEO must persuade those in the boardroom to follow him. This difference in culture was a big surprise, recalls Adler, and took time to adjust to. Learning to persuade others is, in his view, a big part of the leadership process.



Transcript

The beauty of an operating room is the surgeons were as god. And the surgeon says something and it's done. In fact, my wife likes to complain that when I come at home, I pretend that my scrub nurse is always to pick up because that's the way life is in the operating room, you're king. And in the rest of the world, you have to persuade. In the business world, you have persuade your partners, your employees, your customers that this is the right course of action. And this is just taking for granted because you, the surgeon have spoken. So, it's been a learning curve for me. Not that I couldn't do those things but I just didn't have time for it initially. But over the years, I learn that that's a very important part of the management process, the leadership process of an entrepreneurial company. Did that change the way that you act in the operating room? Did you become a little less draconian in the operating room after having to persuade people in the business world? But you have the wrong image.

In the operating room, it's not like you're Attila the Hun, being a jerk to everybody. No, but it's just that there's not a lot of discussion what the plan of attack is going to be. Everyone turns to you and says, "What do we do?" And you say, "This is where we're going." There's no questions asked even in the face of many people skepticism. In the operating room, people just do it because the surgeon has spoken. In the business world, you do something, you haven't got people to buy into it. In the background, they're all stabbing your plan in the back. They're doing everything they can to undermine your plan because for some reason they think they have a better plan or they want to embarrass you. When the patient's life is on the line, everyone knows that there's one person making a decision and that's the end of the story. It's very different when you're in a more complex thing as social dynamic business.