

# My Chair Story: Listening with Leadership, 2006–Present

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I moved the Schenck clan to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in August 2000. Driving into Bernalillo, my youngest son, George, aged 7, woke up and asked me, “You moved us to the desert?” Indeed, we moved to the 505 and The University of New Mexico (UNM) to lead the Sports Medicine Division and Lobo Athletics, while also fulfilling my dream of working with Division I Football and living near a beautiful mountain, similar to the one I had grown up with in Colorado. In addition to loving the climate and beauty of the Sandia Mountains, I quickly worked on making great relationships with UNM coaches and athletes, especially after one of my friends (who used to coach high school football), Rocky Whitworth, paid a visit to Lobo Land to see his old college teammate, Coach Rocky Long.

My first 7 years as head team physician for the UNM Lobos resulted in some of my most pleasant memories at UNM—traveling with the football team, working in the training room, and putting my personal touch on occasionally strained relationships. The faculty members, staff members, and students behind UNM Athletics were amazingly kind to the Schenck family, allowing me to have an unforgettable experience (Figure 1). My surgical practice in sports medicine was extremely rewarding and added to what I call, “happy at work.” Together with my wife, Trish, and the Schenck children (Lillian, Gus, Helen, George, and Marian, who all graduated from Sandia High School), I enjoyed New Mexico and the Southwest immensely. It was bittersweet when Trish and I became Burque empty nesters in 2011 (Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** The University of New Mexico football game of 2006 in War Memorial Stadium, Laramie, Wyoming. The Lobos beat the Wyoming Cowboys, 20-16. Coach Rocky Long came up to me while the field was being plowed and said, “You love this stuff!”



**Figure 2.** The last Schenck family photograph before the nest dispersed at our home on Osuna road. Left to right: Marian, Helen, myself, Trish, Lillian, Gus, and George.

During my first few years, Dr. Moheb “Mo” Moneim would refer to me as a “cheerleader,” and more than once asked if I would consider being chairperson when he was ready to step down. I had already been offered the position at The University of Texas at San Antonio in the late 1990s, but knowing I wanted to move closer to the mountains and drier climate, I had declined the opportunity. Both Mo and Dr. George Omer (the first chair of UNM orthopaedics) were persistent, and I accepted the position in December 2005.

UNM had and has a phenomenal orthopaedic residency program. My main vision, as chair, was to improve upon this already well-established curriculum with a more user-friendly emphasis, and thereby help make it even greater. In the past 10 years, I believe I have accomplished that, thanks to amazing faculty members, residents (whom I refer to as junior-junior faculty), and an essential combination of leadership with listening.

Leadership has many definitions, which are described in countless book titles to read. But the ability to actively listen, take time to reflect, and act—all the while doing the right thing—was a process that I had used successfully for years, even since my days of student government in high school. In addition to re-reading Dale Carnegie’s book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, I was referred to Jim Collins’ publication, *Good to Great*. In a nutshell,

this concept of “G2G” speaks to an atmosphere of creating greatness from an already “good” program by making new leaders . . . stressing responsibility and freedom for junior leaders to make decisions, with the CEO (or chair) taking responsibility for mistakes while acknowledging the victories to those working. In essence, Collins noted the companies that moved from “good to great status” had a leader who would look out the window when crediting successes (never say, “I accomplished it,” and always point to those responsible) and, most importantly, the leader needed to look into the mirror for blame. If pressed on to accept responsibility for a success (I have incorporated the following solution personally), the leader uses the adage, “I guess we got lucky.” I have strived to be this humble leader and acknowledged achievements to our faculty. Let us all adopt the G2G approach in moving forward.

This approach can pose problems. Occasionally, the G2G method is interpreted as a weakness, not unlike taking the time to listen and think before speaking and acting. But my Western roots and upbringing were directly in line with this philosophy. I also found the concepts easy to incorporate within this department (or “Orthopaedic family,” as we often say at UNM), especially with our faculty and residents (Figure 3). Anyone leading or creating a cultural change faces challenges, and finding a roadmap as I did in the idea behind G2G can be very useful (Figures 4 and 5).

Lastly, I think listening is the most important part of my work, particularly when turning problems into successes. Active listening, as we teach in medical school with patients, is ultimately crucial in defining what the challenge is . . . furthermore, this kind of listening solves the issue in the majority of circumstances, often by just letting someone speak about the issue. Finally, you must take time daily for exercise, or just get outside and take a walk. It is during those moments in which the most amazing solutions simply appear or, at least, your problems do not seem so difficult.

Some final thoughts as I look to the bright future of UNM Department of Orthopaedics & Rehabilitation. For other much younger leaders, I have a few precious nuggets of wisdom that may be useful—adopted from Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, Joel Osteen, and yours truly.

No one is in charge of your happiness but you—and it is a daily decision.  
When it comes to going after what you love in life, don’t take no for an answer.  
Love problems, they create your future.  
When solving problems, “no” is often the first answer before “yes.”  
As a leader, always say yes to an idea.  
When in doubt, take the next small step.



Figure 3. Women faculty members and residents of The University of New Mexico (UNM) Department of Orthopaedics & Rehabilitation (“UNM Ortho Women.”) in 2013. I wanted a billboard with this picture that ran, “Our Ortho Women Are Better Than Your Ortho Men.” UNM freaked out, saying that I was just bragging . . . no kidding.



Figure 4. Residents and family of the Department of Orthopaedics & Rehabilitation, on a hike at the top of the Sandia Mountains in fall 2012. Any orthopaedic program is only as good as the residency program, which should be memorable and fun.



Figure 5. Our department’s residents and I in 2010, paint balling out by the Double Eagle II Airport in Albuquerque.