

Culture Leads Care in Life and in Health Care Innovation



“If you don’t figure out how to attract and retain leaders and inspire them to enjoy and be fulfilled by their practice, you won’t be able to create value. The right strategy is important, but long-term in health care services, the company that creates the healthiest culture will win.”

Misha Palecek is the Chief Development Officer for DaVita Inc. and executive sponsor and board member for DaVita Health Solutions.

DaVita Health Solutions was created in 2016; it envisions and implements new care models for some of the most medically complex patients in American health care. Based on a return to primary care in the home, DaVita Health Solutions partners with health plans to offer complementary care services – provided by teams of physicians, nurses, social service professionals, clinical operators and other specialty providers – to their most vulnerable member populations. These members are high-risk patients who have multiple chronic conditions that require them to see many doctors, take numerous medications, and follow multiple care plans; they are also frequent utilizers of the ER and hospital. The care providers and operators work to bring physicians and clinical support teams into very personal contact with patients and their families in settings where they can provide the greatest impact on their care. They are also equipped with the latest technology and tools that add simplicity to the progression of care.

When Steve Jobs was speaking to a Stanford graduating class, he cited the three defining moments of his life as leaving school, getting fired and having cancer. This from the man that birthed the Mac, the iPhone and gave us Siri. The confluence of

the good things and the hardest things pushed into Jobs' life in transformative ways that contributed to who he was, one of the greatest innovators of his generation. Likewise, taking on hard things has played a large role in Palecek's story.

"My parents escaped Czechoslovakia in 1969 and received political asylum in the United States. It was hard. For all intents and purposes, they fought for the American Dream and they achieved it for me and my brothers."

Listening to him describe their sacrifice and hearing the respect that is still very fresh for him gave us a sense of why he can relate to the struggles of families moving through the complex balancing act of juggling scarcity with building a better future for their children. This connection to his parents' determination informs his deep commitment to solving health care's access and affordability challenge; it drives his inspiration to expand availability of the care models within his niche.

Sports are a second formative dimension. Palecek is a determined competitor, and tennis has been his game of choice. A childhood dream had been to play tennis at Stanford University. The lessons he learned growing up in the game prepared him to earn a spot on the team. Amidst a group of elite athletes, he saw that he was individually part of a greater whole. Sacrifice and the ability to put team above self helped shape his values and build his character. Reflecting on memorable matches he described some hard-fought wins; however, Palecek speaks of loss and the ability to deal with it as essential to his personal center of gravity and that of his team as well.

"Tennis taught me that with all the best training and discipline, you are still going to lose games. How you deal with that, what you take away from those losses, is fundamental to what you can offer to others amidst the challenges in business or society as a whole."

Stanford provided Palecek a mentor, as well, in his tennis coach. Palecek describes his coach as a genuinely invested leader who saw ways to support the development of each player and took steps as their ally to push toward each teammate's maximum potential.

Six years ago, Stanford was the setting of another crucial moment in Palecek's narrative. At age 37, his brother contracted a staph infection and was in Stanford Hospital for three weeks. It was a battle he was unable to win physically, and Palecek's brother passed away.

“As his point person, I saw first-hand how the system worked at this top-notch institution. I’d lived a blessed life until then. When something like that happens, it changes perspectives on so many levels. Every day, I encounter people in one dimension of life and have a perception of what they are doing and why. In reality, we all have things going on in our personal lives that can involve tremendous undercurrents of strain and uncertainty. Going through my brother’s illness, I have so much more empathy and insight that help me relate to others.”

In his current role at DaVita, Palecek is assembling some of the brightest minds in the health care business. In his opinion, there isn’t a secret sauce anymore for delivering value-based care; it comes down to leadership attributes. He is tapping into the lessons from his story to define meaningful values and build a highly driven, empathetic leadership culture.

“For us, it’s all about the caretakers and physicians delivering care. If you don’t figure out how to attract and retain leaders and inspire them to enjoy and be fulfilled by their practice, you won’t be able to create value. The right strategy is important, but long-term in health care services, the company that creates the healthiest culture will win. If you see mediocre health care, it is usually coming from uninspired people.”

Palecek’s wife Amanda adds shape to the concepts around culture, care design and creativity. As a trauma surgeon at San Francisco General, she is inspiring conversation nationally through a non-profit she co-founded called Better Lab.

“We are frustrated with the limitations and brokenness of traditional public health and are convinced that we can create more of an inspired solution,” said Dr. Palecek.

Her vision is to build a new type of care economy for the community, with the community and by the community. There is a sense of mutuality between the designers and the recipients of care that invites the recipient to be more than an endpoint of their own care. Ideally, they are inspired to become part of the ongoing design process and can energize an entire stream of new and creative solutions. These solutions, if applied in iterative ways, have enormous opportunity to deconstruct, eliminate waste and bring us to a better place universally.

This mingling of spirit for the Paleceks has offered them an opportunity to energize and sharpen their collective perspective and to appreciate the ironic blending of their life passions.

Palecek is able to pursue those passions within DaVita's most recent venture, DaVita Health Solutions. "We are getting smarter within this concert of care, getting the right resources for specific patient needs. Our newest solutions are focused on some of the sickest patients with the multiple chronic disease states and providing personal care in their homes. It makes sense at multiple levels, especially considering care sensibilities of the front-line providers and patients. There is a different level of immersion that occurs as a provider when you are physically present in a patient's home environment. It introduces a kind of presence and awareness that dignifies the patient in unique ways."

We talked about the implications for patients and their families, as consumer technology constantly evolves to help people think about their health, and how to keep themselves healthy. The optimism, the commitment, and the focus that punctuated our conversation was a telling sign that Palecek – and hopefully other leaders like him – are committed to rise above the noise in the health care conversation and make meaningful changes, employing their own values and the personal experiences that have formed them.

"What I find exhilarating is the potential that if enough things go in the right direction and enough puzzle pieces fall into place, we can actually have an impact on how health care is delivered. And, if we do it right, we can set an example others can follow and have a real impact on how American health care is delivered," he said.



Palecek lives in California with his wife, Amanda, and their two sons, ages 4 and 2. Native California roots keep them close to other family members, and Palecek says he feels fortunate and blessed. "I want to have a blending of life and work and get the most out of both, and, when I look back on my life, I want to have no regrets."

Misha was recently selected to join the Parnassus Community of Leaders. This article is an excerpt from his interview with The Parnassus Group, a senior executive placement firm that strategically partners with clients across the country to build solid leadership teams.