

Choosing, Training and Forging Relationships with incoming Chief Residents

An ideal Chief Resident may possess the highest level of competency, humbleness, charisma, empathy, integrity, mindfulness, approachability and transparency. They are key stakeholders within the residency program and can make or break the academic year. These individuals tend to be the finest of the residency class, respected by colleagues, hand chosen by department personnel. As program coordinators begin to gear up for the next academic year, what's lurking around the corner is the process of choosing, training the incoming leadership team. So how do we contribute to the process and forge relationships with our newly named chief residents to ensure a prosperous academic year?

Choosing a Chief Resident: A Crucial Decision for all Involved

The process in choosing a chief resident is an important decision. All programs want the best possible Chief(s) every year. So, how do we go about this? Is there any one practice that is better than another? Not really, it's just finding what works best for you and your program. And as Program Coordinators, we are looking for many of the same characteristics in a Chief as the faculty and residents. Overall, we want our Chief(s) to be competent, resourceful, fair, hardworking, and advocate for their residents and for us when and if needed.

So, how do we get there? A common practice is to have both the residents and the faculty vote on those residents who will be interested in becoming Chief. Residents interested in becoming Chief submit a short letter of interest expressing their interest and their intentions if given this important role within the residency. Voting can be done electronically, using a system such as Qualtrix to create a ballot and receive votes anonymously. Maybe your program/university has a different program you could utilize. If such a system is not available to you, just an old fashioned check the box on a slip of paper still works these days. (Insert wink here) Once everyone has voted, the Program Coordinator gathers the final results for the Program Director and he/she can discuss the results with the other faculty and the Chair.

If your program is considering changing up the process this year, give it a try. Create an online voting system for both faculty and residents if your program allows for this process. Email the responsibilities of the Chief(s) to all of the residents/faculty before voting begins. If your PD is open to the idea, maybe he/she could meet with each class and check in about their current concerns and ideas for the new academic year. And as the Program Coordinator, your thoughts, vote or voice should also be considered in this process. Your experience and that "gut" feeling is real and usually very accurate. Trust it!

Training your Chief Resident

Chief Residents set the tone for the academic year and often lead initiatives in program improvement through education and change leadership. Medical education, both undergraduate and graduate, cover a lot of science, application and clinical experience but most medical education curriculums do not include the necessary training to develop leadership skills. Many institutions and programs recognize the need for additional training to develop successful and effective chief residents and have established workshops to satisfy this need. These workshops cover topics such as:

- group dynamics
- team building and leading
- conflict management
- effective feedback
- professional development of self and others
- wellness and stress management

In addition to programs, many professional organizations such as the American Academy of Neurology and the Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education offer Resident Leadership Training Programs. For instance, the AAN's Enhanced Adult Resident Leadership Program familiarizes a highly selected group of 15 budding Neurology Resident members with the mechanisms and scope of the AAN and nurtures, develops, and provides opportunities to acquire and enhance key skills while being mentored by established leaders.

Our survey data presented the most common form of training was the one-on-one interaction with their predecessor and provided the following feedback:

- Be willing to set aside what you are doing for others and open minded; sometimes a complaint is not a complaint but another way of looking at things. - Dr. Truong, UT Southwestern Medical Center
- When you have to be responsible for assigning people work there is always someone who is going to be upset with you. Trying to please everyone is futile, so at least try to be equally unfair. Also, In my opinion a chief has to be willing to undertake the extra work required, be motivated to improve the residency, and be willing to make decisions that will not be popular with everyone. - Dr. Kentris, Wright State University
- My advice to incoming Chiefs is to understand that each resident has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. We must be patient and support residents through what can be at times a challenging period in their training. - Dr. Gallardo, University of Chicago
- Know your residents' skill-sets; and make good use of it. Also exert your authority, but pick your battles carefully. Never air your grievances in public, you will lose respect swiftly. - Dr. Rajan, Wright State University
- Always get both sides of the story in conflict resolution! Never give a quick answer before consulting other chiefs, program director and coordinator. - Unknown

PROGRAM COORDINATOR DEVELOPMENT



Forging relationships with the Chief Residents

The team will only be as strong as the relationship, trust and open communication that has been established between all parties. Peggy Nolty, Program Manager at University of Arizona states, "The PD includes the admin staff in as many meetings and discussions as appropriate as soon as the new chiefs are announced. The PD and I have a very close relationship and I think that goes a long way with the resident leadership team". Here are a few practices utilized amongst Program Coordinators within Neurology:

Develop a job description. Creating and discussing a chief's job description before the new academic year can act as the roadmap between team members. Clear expectations are essential so chiefs may play to their strengths and understand potential weaknesses. By establishing it may streamline the workload, identify areas of improvement and mentoring. (1)

Help set expectations and communicate the information with administrative staff. For instance, Deborah Fay, Program Administrator at University of Vermont, keeps administrative staff in the loop regarding resident commitments. From her experience the team is aware of resident commitments and in turn able to communicate with faculty effectively. This level of professionalism fosters trust, respect and compassion between individuals.

Identifying the goals, expectations and rules of the residency program for the residents is important at the beginning of the year. Dr. Gallardo from University of Chicago reflects on the Chief experience and states, "I would've established clear guidelines on how to manage routine obstacles that arise such as residents missing work or evaluation of resident performance". The chief resident must be an advocate for all the residents, juniors and seniors, and has to consider the effects that they will have even after they leave the program. The chief resident can serve to facilitate communication between the staff and the residents and help to increase understanding on both sides when problems occur.

Help with coaching skills and provide appropriate feedback. Dr. Arash from University of Chicago provides remarks on advice for incoming chiefs, "be prepared to take care of ongoing issues that affect residents". As program coordinators we wear many hats and come with different attributes. If we can find ways to saving time and improve resident performance by assisting in minimizing the workload, the overall job satisfaction may increase. Furthermore, developing personal skills can increase the Chief's confidence and overall residency program. (2)

Support the innovations and creativity that may change your program. Dr. Rahan from Wright State University states, "Largely my PC and I concentrated on revamping and rehashing the academics and career guidance. A few to mention: creating new didactic formats, diversifying journal clubs, creating hands-on workshop sessions, horizontal and vertical integration with allied departments on Journal Clubs and Case Conferences, guidance for fellowships, career advice for future practice, enhancing rotating medical students' experience in neurology and enhancing academic output of the residency (posters and abstracts at conferences)". Proper guidance and understanding the program's objectives manifest team bonding, morale, productivity and problem-solving skills. This behavior encourages a mindset of continuous learning and curiosity. (3)

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Be the expert. As the program administrator, we have a responsibility to understand the board and program requirements. Mary Phelan, Education Administrator at SUNY Upstate Medical University currently provides guidelines that were created based on program needs for scheduling. She states, "The Chiefs meet with the PD about how to create the schedules and I meet with them about the scheduling system". Knowing the particulars of the subject matter is the first step in creating a sound program that runs efficiently. People are more likely to believe your opinion when you know more and have a deep understanding of your topic. This makes you more trustworthy and your opinion may be heard while discussing programmatic decisions.

Open Door Policy. Dr. Gallardo from University of Chicago shares, "I would have also created more junior resident meetings only to provide a clear space for them to express their thoughts on the program". First, by making yourself accessible, you are helping your residents to feel more comfortable stopping by for any number of reasons, from a quick hello to a difficult issue. In general, this gives you a better idea of what is happening in the program on a daily basis, especially on those harried days when you find it hard to step away from your desk. Second, an open-door policy lets everyone know that you really care, and that you are both interested and engaged in the day-to-day operations. Team members will be more likely to chat with you informally about things going on in the department, which will give you insight into their thinking and generate ideas for change or improvement. Finally, an open-door policy helps to create a friendlier culture within your workplace. A closed-door acts as a barrier between you and those working for you. If you avoid this, your residents will know that you are genuinely interested in them as human beings and not just about the job functions they perform. They will also feel that you are likely to be open and honest with them when necessary. Both of these things will increase morale overall. (4)

Hail to the Chief

Fostering communication between incoming chief residents and program leadership can improve the working relationship. Program directors and chief residents expect each other to act as a role model for the residents, be approachable and available, and to be transparent and fair in their decision-making processes (5). As the Program Coordinator, taking the time to explore different methods of choosing and training your Chief Resident team can build the foundation for the next academic year.

Michelle R. Armstrong, MAEd, C-TAGME, Residency and Fellowship Coordinator, Department of Neurology, Loyola University Medical Center

Marla Scofield, C-TAGME, Education Administrator, Department of Neurology, The University of Chicago Fran Clark, C-TAGME, Residency Program Coordinator, WSU Department of Neurology

Rebecca M. Grubb, Neurology Residency Program Coordinator, Department of Neurology, Saint Louis University School of Medicine

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The views expressed here are strictly of the authors viewpoint and does not necessarily reflect the stance of the American Academy of Neurology.