

Outside the Box: Ron Walls of Brigham & Women's Hospital

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By Jessica Bartlett



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Dr. Ron M. Walls, executive vice president and COO at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

Ron Walls

Title: Executive vice president and chief operating officer, Brigham & Women's Hospital

Education: Bachelor's degree from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver; doctoral degree in medicine from University British Columbia

Age: 60

Residence: Wellesley

Dr. Ron Walls has been the chief operating officer for Brigham and Women's Hospital during a trying four months that saw a staff physician fatally shot on the hospital's grounds and a barrage of snow storms trigger emergency measures.

But with 21 years in his previous role as the chairman of the Brigham's Department of Emergency Medicine, during which he had to manage the hospital's response to the Boston Marathon bombing, Walls was well prepared when he was tapped last year to become COO.

Nonetheless, Walls admits there is lots to learn as he settles into his new position. In an interview with the Boston Business Journal's Jessica Bartlett, Walls recently talked about his new role, his mentors and the possibility of someday dining with Elon Musk.

You were chairman of the Department of Emergency Medicine for 21 years, and later in your time had to deal with the Marathon. What did you learn from that in coming to this new role?

I think my entire leadership career prepared me for this. I've had a lot of leadership experience and the opportunity to lead others, help inform their careers, help systems operate, help people work together. That all fit together. (It's been) a lifetime of learning for this.

The marathon was a moment in a lifetime of learning ...it was a moment in which I was asked to lead in a much more visible way than I was used to leading. But it was the same leadership set, the same preparation ... the same leadership set I've used for everything else I've done. It just got called to be used in a different way.

What is that leadership set?

I think leaders lead by example. I think they have to show the confidence they have in the people around them so those people can have confidence in themselves or reaffirm that confidence. I think there is a fairness and balance to it, an evenness, so that you don't get one kind of leader on Monday and a different kind on Tuesday and one kind in one event and a different during another. It's that ability to have a stable platform and stable principals you can use to guide your actions.

Were those skills learned or are they innate?

I think there has to be some innate quality. People have to be comfortable in that role of having to make sometimes big decisions and to have the confidence and faith to move forward with them.

You were in this new role for 15 days, and the Brigham shooting occurred. What have you taken away from that experience?

I think that reinforced a lot of what I learned in the marathon response. People in a community can be magnificently resilient. And that was obviously completely unexpected, horrifically violent, senseless, happened inside our doors. And what really was amazing to me was how the community bonded together, how resilient they were.

Who are your mentors?

I think I've had two really significant mentors in my life. The first was Dr. Peter Rosen, who was one of the founding specialists in emergency medicine in the country. He was running the program I trained in Denver, and really had a tremendous amount of shaping my focus on academic emergency medicine, and a lot of my career decisions that came after. And probably my leadership mentor is John McArthur, former dean of the Harvard Business School ... John has been a really good friend over the years. And he's been the person I turned to most often when I've had complicated things to work through.

What is your favorite book?

"Tinker Tailor Solider Spy" (by John Le Carre) ... I think it's a series of great character studies first, but it's a story of trying to solve an unsolvable problem.

If you could have dinner with anyone, who would it be?

Elon Musk, the guy who created Tesla, Paypal, Hyperloop. Two things about him: He's had a series of

spectacular successes and has accomplished an incredible thing that would be a life work for someone, and keeps that going and immediately turns his attention to another challenge and takes it on. I want to find out how he does it. He also is the ultimate translational scientist, the ability to take extremely complex problems and (solve) them in a way that does good for people. ... I'd love to have a couple of hours with him.

What is your motto?

My work motto is "Find great people, empower them, develop them, and back them up." That is the simple formula for success in any endeavor. My personal motto is "Treat everyone well and with respect."