

# Conversations That Matter

## Supporting Faculty and Team Vitality in Academic Medicine

### Summary

*Conversations that Matter – Flourishing in the Flux: Conversations on Thriving in Academic Medicine*, was held on November 14, 2025.

Key insights, themes, ideas, and practices discussed within the conversations of GFA and GCEC members are shared here. These are grouped under the two questions posed to the participants to guide the conversation.

A separate document titled **Promising Practices** summarizes the activities and practices shared in the conversations in greater detail.

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### Discussion Question 1

**When you think about the environments or practices that really keep faculty engaged and energized during times of big change, what's working well? And where do you see the biggest opportunities to strengthen their growth, well-being, and resilience?**

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### Key Insights / Themes

#### 1. Communication, Transparency, and Meaning-Making

Across all groups, transparent communication surfaced as one of the strongest anchors of faculty engagement during change. Faculty feel energized when leadership provides:

- Clear explanations of what is happening and why
- Honest acknowledgment of uncertainty
- Messaging that prevents speculation and reduces misinformation
- Guided narratives that help faculty interpret change instead of creating their own stories

Lack of communication leads to distrust, anxiety, disengagement, and internal narratives that become difficult to dismantle. When communication is strong, faculty report feeling more connected, valued, and secure.

## **2. Connection to Purpose, Mission, and Shared Values**

Many groups emphasized that returning faculty to their sense of purpose, core values, and professional identity is stabilizing in times of upheaval. Purpose-driven work:

- Helps faculty stay motivated when external pressures intensify
- Reinforces institutional values during uncertainty
- Provides a source of meaning that can anchor individuals through change

## **3. Community, Relationships, and Social Belonging**

Faculty engagement increases when institutions create opportunities for colleagues to connect authentically. Themes included:

- Informal meet-ups outperforming formal events
- Restorative practices and listening circles
- Peer support and commensality (shared meals, gatherings)
- Inclusion efforts that foster agency, belonging, and shared understanding

One repeated theme was **faculty feel heard by each other in informal settings more than in structured feedback sessions.**

## **4. Emotional Realism: Acknowledging Loss, Grief, and Fatigue**

Groups repeatedly noted that change creates:

- Loss of identity
- Grief for structures or programs that no longer exist
- Burnout from increased workloads and financial constraints
- Demoralization linked to funding crises, layoffs, and DEI ecosystem instability

Leaders who acknowledge these reactions build trust and resilience.

## **5. The Mid-Career Faculty Gap**

Several groups noted that **associate professors** seem particularly disengaged or overlooked. There is a need for:

- Targeted coaching
- Leadership development
- Community-building opportunities
- Renewed attention to career pathways and long-term meaning

## **6. Trust, Psychological Safety, and Authenticity**

Trust-building emerged as essential. Faculty respond positively when leadership:

- Shows vulnerability
- Admits limits (“We can’t say more right now...”)
- Demonstrates empathy and real appreciation
- Creates safe spaces where faculty can express frustrations and hopes

## **7. Leadership Presence and Modeling**

Faculty look to leadership to:

- Maintain calm, long-term perspective
- Model inclusive behavior
- Foster agency and shared purpose
- Set priorities that reduce noise and refocus energy

Leadership authenticity was highlighted as a key driver of engagement.

## **Ideas or Promising Practices Mentioned & Shared**

*(See Promising Practices Document for further details)*

### **1. Communication & Trust-Building Structures**

- Listening circles and restorative practices
- Leadership acknowledgment of uncertainty
- Regular messaging that reduces speculation
- Opportunities for faculty to express concerns safely

### **2. Community and Networking Initiatives**

- Quarterly networking events (4:20–6:30 PM) aligned with faculty schedules
- Informal meet-ups that outperform formal sessions
- Wisdom dinners using appreciative inquiry

- Commensality groups to restore belonging

### **3. Purpose, Identity, and Strengths-Based Development**

- Faculty coaching programs
- Gallup Strengths training, especially for mid-career faculty
- Workshops connecting work to meaning and institutional values
- Initiatives linking faculty development with well-being

### **4. Well-Being and Flourishing Practices**

- “One Percent Campaign”: weekly micro-sharing/learning videos
- Flourishing Fridays: reflections on well-being and weekly goals
- Well-being sessions and mind-body skills training
- Leadership reminding faculty what is still within their control
- Georgetown model of flourishing advocated by Adi Haramati—linking joy, positivity, and flourishing.

### **5. Resources and Support Structures**

- “Share Care Boxes” for department chairs with curated resources
- Family-friendly events recognizing faculty achievements
- Augmented promotion pathways and recognition programs
- DEI-informed support for the unique needs of community groups
- Departments revising workflows related to institutional mergers, new leadership, and budget restructuring.
- Recognizing faculty contributions through P&T ceremonies and awards

### **6. Culture, Vulnerability, and Authentic Leadership**

- Leaders openly acknowledging what they do and do not know
- Encouraging vulnerability to foster solidarity
- Modeling emotional intelligence and long-view leadership

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#### **Discussion Question 2**

**What helps you and your team flourish—to stay energized, purposeful, and effective—in your work right now? What factors are currently having the biggest impact in making it harder to sustain or achieve a sense of flourishing?**

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#### **Key Insights / Themes**

## **1. Meaning, Purpose, and Shared Values as Stabilizers**

Teams flourish when their work is connected to:

- Shared mission
- Core values
- Opportunities to contribute meaningfully

This is especially critical when the external environment is unpredictable.

## **2. Relationships, Social Connection, and Team Cohesion**

Strong interpersonal connections buffer stress and enhance resilience. Flourishing is supported by:

- Community and camaraderie
- Trust and shared ownership
- Opportunities for collaboration and cross-unit work

Small teams often flourish more easily, while larger teams struggle under the weight of complexity.

## **3. Leadership Behaviors that Promote Stability**

Teams flourish when leaders:

- Maintain a long-term perspective
- Model calm, intentional behavior
- Demonstrate empathy
- Provide grace and flexibility
- Support adaptation and creative problem-solving. Doing things differently with fewer resources
- Identify opportunities for collaborations between key faculty and administrators so that they break down the silos

Leadership acknowledgment of workload pressures and emotional tolls helps teams feel supported.

## **4. Barriers to Flourishing: Overload, Staffing Cuts, and Poly-Crisis Conditions**

Across groups, major obstacles included:

- Understaffing and increased workloads
- Too many urgent tasks overshadowing meaningful work
- Financial constraints and institutional budget crises
- Changes in policies, legislation, or organizational structure

- Loss of time leading to miscommunication and reduced self-management
- Burnout, chronic fatigue, and emotional depletion
- Hybrid flexibility being removed for some staff but not faculty, generating inequities
- Different expectation in navigating mandatory 5-day in-office work with hybrid schedules within team or among institutional colleagues creating tension and challenges to flourishing

Many teams reported feeling as though they are functioning within a “poly-crisis”, where multiple disruptions compound one another.

## **5. Identity, Recognition, and Appreciation**

Teams flourish when:

- Their contributions are acknowledged
- Leaders express gratitude
- Recognition goes beyond formal programs and feels genuine
- Appreciation is embedded into the culture

Faculty need recognition not only for outcomes but for perseverance during challenging times.

## **6. Navigating Uncertainty and Loss**

Several groups discussed:

- The emotional impact of losing ways of working that previously felt stable
- Grief associated with program reduction, staffing losses, or shifting roles
- The need for leaders to help teams process these transitions and sense of loss and grief with compassion
- Adapting work to new ways and build inclusion by addressing the unique needs of our community members

## **7. Engaging New Team Members**

In times of constant change, it is easy to neglect onboarding or integrating new team members. Teams recognized that sustained flourishing requires:

- Intentional onboarding
- Culture-building practices
- Inclusion of newcomers into communication loops and community-building efforts
- Awareness and support of teammates who may be engaging in new assignments

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## **Ideas or Promising Practices Mentioned & Shared**

*(See Promising Practices Document for further details)*

### **1. Team-Level Flourishing Practices**

- *Flourishing Fridays*: sharing weekly well-being highlights + anticipatory goals
- Group reading (e.g., *Who Moved My Cheese?*) to normalize change
- Constructive, honest reflection time during team check-ins
- Breaking down silos by intentionally connecting administrators and faculty across roles
- Using AI to improve efficiency and reduce administrative burden
- Encouraging vulnerability among team members and leadership
- Prioritizing community-building in staff meetings

### **2. Creating Space and Time for Connection**

- Regular meetings for alignment and sense-making
- Touchpoints with faculty that keep communication open consistently
- Safe spaces for vulnerability, transparency, and emotional processing

### **3. Recognizing and Supporting Teams in Times of Reduced Capacity**

- Leaders offering grace when delays occur
- Recognizing that hiring freezes and expanded responsibilities impact productivity
- Encouraging team members to adopt a future-oriented, opportunity-seeking mindset

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## **Selected Comments:**

### **Major Recurrent Themes**

- Purpose and values are stabilizers – in times of change, they provide clarity and motivation.
- Relationships buffer stress – social support networks help faculty navigate uncertainty.
- Transparency is a trust-building tool – clear communication prevents speculation and fosters confidence.

### **Fostering Agency and Supporting Change**

- Shifting the focus to what we can control and do. Potential for impact – support the students. How can I show up and offer myself. Reminding people that we are not completely helpless.
- Take this an opportunity to see your work in a different way – challenge modes of thinking.
- Trying to look at the future for opportunities. See how we've grown and improved. Systems thinker and look to the opportunities. Where can we create efficiencies and improvements?

### **Insights for Leading**

- Leadership shapes the story – if leaders don't provide context, faculty will fill the gaps themselves – often negatively.
- Leadership needs to be a voice and acknowledge that they have been heard. Acknowledge that we don't have answers for everything. It is powerful.
- People are coming together but there is a reticence to do that. One opportunity is to show up with more vulnerability – resonates well. Sometimes we don't know or can't say is information for stakeholders. This creates some solidarity and helps breakdown barriers. Saying, "We can't divulge any more..." sometimes goes a long way.
- As the current environment can take our attention away from those we support, remember to engage new team members who have the challenge of learning a new culture and others who may be engaging in new assignments.

### **On Appreciation**

- Faculty value genuine appreciation beyond formal recognition programs.