

Dear Colleagues...

As many of you may know, a giant of IHI's formation and history died last week, on March 3, at age 85: David Gustafson. Few, if any, of IHI's founders had more influence than Dave did on our chartering ideas and core programs. Especially for those of you who never had the pleasure and privilege of meeting Dave or of working with him, I would like to share a few reflections.

I was introduced to Dave by Paul Batalden, who is the person whose vision and leadership truly led to our founding. When Paul told me about Dave, he said, I recall, that Dave was the most creative person he knew. Soon, I felt the same about Dave.

As the small group that founded IHI (which was nicknamed "The Birthday Club") sat together in repeated meetings in 1986 and 1987, Dave was at our center, prodding us to think bigger, wider, and more iconoclastically. Giving us the confidence to try something really new. Dave never seemed to meet a mold that he was not interested in breaking, or at least testing to the limit. He brought forward fundamental ideas of what we now call "patient centered care" and "coproduction" decades before they became a thing. When we first met, Dave was doing randomized controlled trials proving that even very elderly people could master home computers and use them for self-management of their own chronic conditions. He developed a self-care program called the Computerized Health Education Support System ("CHESS") before there was a Google, Apple, or even, mostly, laptops.

Formally, Dave was Professor of Industrial Engineering and Preventive Medicine at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. I doubt that anyone else ever had that title before, and even probably since. He taught generations of students who today bridge between health and engineering. He authored hundreds of peer reviewed papers. He applied for and received more research grants than most entire universities do. (Paul Batalden tells me that Dave was writing a grant application the week he died.)

Dave was a founding and longstanding IHI Board member, and a priceless voice for new ideas and optimism among us. He constantly reminded us to take what patients and families said and thought seriously – to use their wisdom to shape our work. In 2008, Dave suffered a serious cardiac threat and was the recipient of a heart transplant that gave him 18 more years of a life of enormous productivity ... a pioneer even in his own medical story.

For all of Dave's brilliance, what sticks foremost with me is his cheering, encouraging presence. He had not a mean word for anyone, and he encouraged everyone. There were entry-level staff that he met at IHI who today are full professors due to his nurturance and mentoring. His was the soul of a great teacher. He knew improvement science cold and contributed to its development. Among his close colleagues at Madison and around the US were some of the greatest founding researchers and scholars in improvement science, like George Box, Brian Joiner, Stu Hunter, Andre Delbeq, and Andy Van de Ven, whose work he often brought to the attention of IHI leaders. He believed in people, and, though not a bit naïve, he always found the route to a good question and an exciting conversation and, usually, a good joke.

Dave Gustafson leaves a legacy of friendship, academic creativity, innovative health care designs, and an example of graciousness that, in my lucky life, has no parallel. I loved him. Those of you who missed meeting him missed a real treat, but I will tell you – and please know - that, when you see IHI at its best, you are seeing Dave Gustafson.

With warm wishes, --Don