Reclaiming Our Values: Lessons from Tragedy

BY ROBERT L. VENINGA, PhD

“Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.” —HENRY DAVID THOREAU

September 11, 2001, is a day none of us will forget. The aftermath of the destruction has been grim—not only in terms of lives lost, but in the toll the terrorist attacks have taken on the nation’s self-confidence. Economic growth has stagnated. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost. And many organizations are struggling to regain their footing.

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Of course, not everything went well. Assumptions about the strength of the World Trade Towers were erroneous. Although the towers were built to absorb the impact of a Boeing 707, a plane almost as big as the 767 jetliners piloted by the terrorists, they could not withstand the hood of flaming jet fuel. Nor could anyone imagine that the structures would collapse, crushing rescue workers sent to help.

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What is the worst crisis your health care organization could face? Test your assumptions of whether your disaster plans are adequate. The fact is, hospitals and public health organizations throughout the country are not ready for biological attack, to say nothing of nuclear radiation. But as U.S. News and World Report states, we can no longer hope it never happens. After September 11, we have little choice but to be prepared for the unthinkable.

Why is it important to test your assumptions about the crises your organization could face? Because our assumptions become an intellectual straightjacket that prevents us from focusing on what could threaten us. Few in the government, for example, believed that 19 suicidal terrorists could turn four jetliners into guided missiles. It was more than a failure of intelligence, states Newsweek. “It was a failure of imagination.”

When the Titanic sank, claiming 1,500 lives, a cruise ship named the Californian was less than 20 miles away—a vessel that could have rescued lives. Unfortunately, it did not respond to the Titanic’s distress signals; the radio dispatcher was not on duty. The moral of the story is that we can’t afford to be asleep at the switch.

NOTHING SUBSTITUTES FOR OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP

In his book Managing Transitions, William Bridges states that “Big ears and big hearts are common characteristics in effective leaders.” By all accounts, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s leadership was impeccable in the days after the tragedy because he listened with both his head and his heart. But he did more than that; he coordinated rescue operations. He kept citizens informed about what had happened and what was being done. He appeared at “ground zero” multiple times to encourage rescue workers. And he patiently answered questions from a news-hungry world.

A valuable lesson for health care leaders: When a crisis occurs, be visible no matter what your role is. In times of uncertainty, employees want thoughtful and compassionate leaders who are visible—developing plans, providing encouragement, disseminating information. Remember this important fact: The best management strategy in the world is to tell the truth. As management theorist Tom Peters states, “There’s a clear defense against cynicism in my organization, and that is to tell the unvarnished truth.”

A GENEROUS SPIRIT LIVES IN THE HEARTS OF PEOPLE

When the call for volunteers went out, government officials were overwhelmed with offers of
The same politics of self-destruction can often be detected in hospitals and public health organizations.

Few Things Are as Powerful as Simple Acts of Kindness

Acts of compassion abounded after the terrorist attacks. Citizens from Miami to Seattle gave blood. More than $100 million in financial aid poured in, the result of a single television appeal. Prisoners in Louisiana, making 40 cents an hour, raised $11,000 for victims and their families. A shoe store owner noticed women fleeing the World Trade Center barefoot, having abandoned their cumbersome dress shoes. He invited them into his store and gave them comfortable shoes to wear—at no cost.

We need to reaffirm what is important. Nancy Gibbs, who has written more than 100 cover stories for Time magazine, put it this way:

[The World Trade Center catastrophe] has become a time of homecoming and housecleaning, of fathers calling their estranged sons and making confessions, trying to put things right; of old friends getting past small grudges that don't matter anymore and probably never did; of couples renewing their vows and deciding it's O.K. to go in late for work. Single 20-somethings in Manhattan whose families live far away have started having sleepovers, like in junior high. Fifty-year-old parents, the generation that probably never did; of couples renewing their vows and deciding it's O.K. to go in late for work. Single 20-somethings in Manhattan whose families live far away have started having sleepovers, like in junior high. Fifty-year-old parents, the generation that thought it had won the Last Battle, call their 18-year-old kids every night and cry.

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showed and advertising vehicles that were not in keeping with the image Scripps wished to portray were avoided. Copy in the ads included statements such as, “We were fighting a disease no one could diagnose. Scripps did” and “When my heart failed, Scripps didn’t. They saved my life.”

To increase the number of consumers choosing Scripps hospitals and physicians during open enrollment, staff also created the new slogan, “Choose wisely. Choose well. Choose Scripps.”

“This slogan gave us a much needed call to action in our ads and a directive for consumers during open enrollment,” said Stark. “Including the word ‘choice’ in many of the headlines kept us on message. ‘Choose wisely’ also gave us a natural transition from the testimonial into the nuts and bolts of the ad, which included our affiliated physician groups, hospitals, toll-free referral number, and website address.”

As an incentive for consumers to call the referral line, Scripps offered free first-aid guides.

Advertising mediums were also selected wisely. Early on, the committee decided not to pursue television because of its high costs and production challenges, even though Scripps and other area hospitals had used it previously. The team believed strongly that radio and outdoor advertising (billboards, mall kiosk signs, etc.) together with newspaper ads would provide the broadest possible exposure for its limited budget.

Additionally, Scripps participated in more than 40 local employer health fairs and several community events. During these events, Scripps staff offered free health screenings at a striking exhibit that included photographs of patients featured in the campaign, along with the new slogan and tag line. “We also turned our employees into open enrollment ambassadors. This was accomplished by asking them, in our internal newsletters and posters, to encourage friends and neighbors to choose Scripps. We also gave out internal flyers on the campaign, e-mailed staff, and wrote articles about it in our internal newsletter. Finally, we handed out more than 5,000 license plate frames bearing our slogan,” said Clay.

One of the campaign’s greatest strengths was in the use of patient testimonials. In Scripps’ case, these life-saving examples brought home the importance of choosing the right doctor—the crucial message of any open enrollment effort.

“We believed that a personal recommendation of Scripps from a real San Diegan as opposed to a model would carry more weight with consumers,” said Clay. Of equal importance was the continued enthusiasm of the different departments featured in the ads and the pride of all Scripps employees in the new messages.

By all accounts, the open enrollment campaign was a tremendous success. “The organization has embraced the new tag line,” says Clay. “Calls to our toll-free referral center continually increased during the course of the four-month campaign, and website hits more than doubled in the first month and rose steadily during the campaign. Our referral specialists reported that they were able to offer referral advice and general Scripps information to callers whose main purpose was to get the free first-aid guide. We are now beginning to track the actual increase in affiliated lives, the use of Scripps services, and our return on investment.”

Another signal in the campaign’s success is that the Scripps Human Resources Department is now developing a nurse recruitment campaign around the advertising slogan, “Choose Wisely. Choose Well. Choose Scripps.”

For further information, contact Rhoda Weis at 310-593-5183 or at rweis@memnet.org.

Pablo Casals, the Spanish cellist and writer, had it right: “The capacity to care is the thing which gives life its deepest significance.”

FAITH MATTERS

The day after the tragedy, I walked past a chapel in a Minneapolis hospital. No formal worship service was taking place, but a steady stream of employees entered. One nurse told me, “Every since the tragedy, employees have come to meditate. Every department of the hospital has been represented. There are janitors praying with surgeons and there are administrators meditating alongside the families of patients.”

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the tragedy is that many of us have reaffirmed something we have long known—life is uncertain, and faith matters. True, our innocence has been lost and the damage done by terrorists will linger. Nevertheless, 80 percent of Americans believe the attacks will make the country stronger, and only 14 percent think that our way of life is fundamentally threatened. From what ashes does such optimism arise? One observer put it this way: “So much that was precious had died, but as though in a kind of eternal promise, something new has been born. We are seeing it in our nation and sensing it in ourselves, a new faith in our oldest values, a rendezvous with grace.”

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