The Power of Mission

Healthcare delivery is changing so fast that mission leaders face unprecedented challenges in ensuring that Catholic values continue to underpin all their organizations' activities. Power—often thought of in negative terms—is a key to enhancing the vital role of mission leaders, particularly as Catholic providers collaborate with non-Catholics.

Because power enables persons to accomplish what they want to accomplish, effective mission leaders must learn how to gain and use it, according to R. Wayne Boss, professor, University of Colorado at Boulder College of Business and Administration and Graduate School of Business Administration.

At a January meeting of system mission leaders sponsored by the Catholic Health Association, Boss urged attendees to learn more about power. Most people tend to underestimate the amount of power they have, he said. Mission leaders have more power than they realize, he said, because mission is the driving force behind everything a Catholic healthcare organization does.

“It is no longer enough for mission to be understood as particular activities or programs,” noted program participant Sr. Diana Bader, OP, vice president of mission leadership at Sisters of...
**Sources of Power**
To ensure that their contributions are honored, mission leaders should draw on the most potent source of power: referent power—that is, not what you know but who you know, Boss said. Referent power is based on the trust in a relationship. “When hospital CEOs trust you, you have access to every source of power available to them,” he said.

Power is historical, Boss added; it depends on how long you have known someone and the nature of your relationship. “So be careful about protecting that history because you can’t rewrite it.” Since referent power is so personal, he added, the best way to get something done is by working one-on-one.

Power’s least important source is position, Boss said. Even though position gives access to sources of power that might not be available otherwise, the power of position is only circumstantial and may actually harm relationships, according to Boss. Coercion, he added, is the second least powerful source because it works for only a short time. Also, it tends to invite coercion as a response, resulting in an escalation in which everybody loses. “You lose trust when someone is coercive with you,” Boss said.

Other sources of power include reward, expertise, information, charisma, wealth, love, and spirituality. “The power that is associated with one’s creator is the place where Catholic hospitals have an edge over others,” he noted. “The environment in Catholic organizations is different from in others. This is the place where mission has an edge.”

**Characteristics of Power**
Sources of power are interrelated and cumulative, Boss said. “The more sources of power you can draw on, the more powerful you will be. Similarly, if you can increase the depth of your power—the positions you hold or the expertise you have—you will be more powerful.”

He emphasized, however, that power flows one-way. We only have power over someone if they allow us to—if they trust us (referent power) or if they value something that we control. “You have to behave in ways that cause people to want to empower you,” Boss advised. Above all, power is fragile, he stressed. Those who have more power must be more careful not to abuse it, because they can lose it very quickly. “The person in the best position to help someone is also in the best position to hurt them,” he said, “and once you’ve hurt someone, they’re not likely to trust you again.”

Unfortunately, he added, most people abuse power because they do not understand it. They may use more power than is needed. “It takes a lot more coercive power to do the same job compared with using referent power or reward.”

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Properly used, power is a great motivator. “People will do things for power that they won’t do for other reasons,” Boss said.

HOW TO USE POWER
One reason people view power negatively is they think when someone else gains power, that means they have lost some. But “power is not zero sum,” Boss stressed. “It’s like love: The more power you share, the more you’ll have.”

Admitting your mistakes is another way to increase your own power; it proves you are trustworthy and honest. This has great implications for how we deal with people, Boss noted. “If an issue is emotionally charged, it’s a power struggle by definition,” he said. “The only way to win a power struggle is not to play it.” If someone is angry with you, Boss suggested apologizing even if you feel in the right. “You can be right, or you can have power,” he advised.

Forgiveness is also empowering. “When you hate someone, you’re in the palm of his hand and he can squish you anyway he chooses,” Boss said.

To keep power once you have it, Boss recommended the use of persuasion, patience, gentleness, kindness, teachability (the attitude that everyone is superior to you in many ways), and accurate information before making decisions. If you must reproach somebody, he suggests following the reproach with increased love to restore trust.

“Leaders must be willing to love and support their people,” Boss said. The difference between success and failure, he added, is that members of winning teams love each other. “Catholic healthcare facilities are unique because of the love that permeates them,” Boss claimed. In the turbulent times ahead, this love—and the commitment to values and mission fostered by effective mission leaders—will be crucial for the Catholic healthcare ministry to flourish.

—Susan K. Hume

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Among the options that have succeeded in several companies are establishing a cultural diversity task force or putting in place a diversity “champion” who is accountable directly to the chief executive officer. First tasks for the task force or champion are assessing the organization’s selection, retention, and promotion policies; establishing a mentoring program; and providing sensitivity training for managers (especially white men) and corporate survival training for minorities and women. It will also be essential to discover what barriers to advancement exist.

Managing a diverse work force is demanding and will require a great deal of leadership attention. As the pressures of healthcare reform build, the temptation to push cultural diversity issues to the background will be strong. But with managed care and managed competition essential components of healthcare reform, can Catholic healthcare leaders morally and financially afford to ignore these issues any longer?

NOTES
8. Thomas, p. 25.