

EMBRACING CHANGE: IT'S WHO WE ARE

As Catholic health leaders, we believe in the power of transformation to bring ourselves and our ministries more fully to life. Yet seemingly never-ending and accelerated change wearies us.



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GONZALES**

I recently had the opportunity to participate as a panelist on a CHA webinar with my colleagues Jill Fisk, CHA's director of mission services, and Lisa Reynolds, vice president for change management with CHRISTUS Health. We had an uplifting dialogue and engaged in an experiential practice that focused on ministry leadership and our readiness and ability to embrace change during these challenging times for all of us serving in Catholic health care. Following that webinar, I found myself reflecting on the discussion and how we can be more effective leaders who can help our ministries survive and thrive in turbulent times — while at the same time maintaining our integrity and commitment to our mission.

As I gathered my thoughts from our discourse, I went back and reviewed what research tells us about how leaders can successfully navigate significant change and challenges. With my background in organizational development, I wanted to construct a rich and accurate description of the “universal experience” of leaders who have had similar experiences in organizations during periods of change, crisis and upheaval. I hope to shed some light on the complex and unique role that leadership plays and the different approaches they have used during difficult times.

EFFECTIVE QUALITIES TO ADDRESS CHANGE

Positive Worldview

It won't come as a surprise that the findings around

successful approaches during organizational change revealed that a person's individual experience as a leader was unique; however, some interesting commonalities and differences emerged. One is that a leader's worldview is critical. Specifically, a generally positive worldview indicates a greater ability to embrace organizational change as an opportunity to grow and improve. The optimistic worldview confirms the assertion that this way of perceiving the world, combined with a leader's intrinsic skills, qualities or emotional intelligence — even more than their intellect — serve as primary drivers of whether or not that leader can successfully encourage the creation of an organizational culture that responds positively to change and can adapt and grow in response to it.¹ In ministry language, this brings us to the question: Are we a hopeful people?

Collaboration and teamwork form the bedrock of an effective leadership strategy, and in this critical role of encouraging the creation of collaborative networks, a leader must also be a good communicator.

Collaboration and Solid Communication

Collaboration is another key quality that successful leaders must possess. Only then can we serve as catalysts whose primary function is to build relationships and foster the creation of complex networks throughout an organization. Collaboration and teamwork form the bedrock of an effective leadership strategy, and in this critical role of encouraging the creation of collaborative networks, a leader must also be a good communi-

tor. These vital skills include effective listening, written and oral communication skills, excellent nonverbal skills, approachability and transparency. These important leadership qualities speak to our ability to relate to and appreciate the perspectives of others, the ability to demonstrate good social skills, the ability to engage in difficult dialogue and the ability to learn through ongoing critical reflection.²

In today's complex world, ethical dilemmas and competing interests permeate the workplace. Only through open and honest dialogue will leaders be able to assess, address and resolve the myriad of complex situations that await them in their organizations.

These competencies relate directly or indirectly to a leader's ability to collaborate and communicate effectively with others. All are very personal and internally focused, reaffirming the premise that the leadership qualities that are most critical during times of change are in the affective domain, which are frequently referred to as "soft skills." Fortunately, this is precisely where Catholic health care leaders excel.

Visionary Leadership, Managerial Courage

Effective leaders are visionary and work with others and the community to define a mission-focused picture of the future. This vision is not static, however. A leader must have an ever-evolving vision that adapts to the organizational culture and business environment. This requires us to think globally and see the bigger picture, especially amid difficult change experiences.

At the same time, a leader must be skilled at having difficult conversations not only with those they manage but also with colleagues and those who manage them. Engaging in these discussions with the latter generally involves greater risk, yet exerting such managerial courage does not always mean playing the role of the "warrior." There are rare occasions that will call for the warrior leader

in us to emerge, but in most instances, managerial courage will be required in the daily conversations leaders have with coworkers.³ These conversations and difficult dialogues are worth having to focus on how best to achieve the mission.

Conflict Resolution

I would suggest that current and future leaders add conflict resolution skills to their toolbox.

There are a variety of techniques people can learn to help them navigate potentially sensitive conversations. Such training will help leaders become more adept at exerting managerial courage when called upon to do so. In today's complex world, ethical dilemmas and competing interests permeate the workplace. Only through open and honest dialogue will leaders be able to assess, address and resolve the myriad of complex situations that await them in their organizations. Managerial courage and conflict resolution can no longer be relegated to the category "other duties assigned as necessary" in the leader's job description. An effective leader must be able and willing to have those difficult conversations with their employees, colleagues and managers. The cost of not doing so is simply too high.

THE POWER OF REFLECTION

Finally, while holding and demonstrating these leadership competencies, skills and behaviors is quite a challenge for anyone, none is possible without frequent reflection or prayer. This is particularly important in today's rapidly changing world, where knowledge and technology are advancing exponentially. Leaders are called upon more than ever to keep pace. Reflection seems to be a natural process for some, while for others, it must be learned and practiced. It may begin as an extraneous and almost artificial activity. But eventually, it needs to become an internal and continuous process, a lifelong disposition and a consciously applied means for greater effectiveness in leadership.⁴ Reflection can be hard and extra work, but its benefits are immeasurable in both personal and professional terms. We need

only look to the example of the religious sisters who came before us and continue to serve with us to appreciate the power of reflection.

Critical reflection is important for identifying and questioning assumptions, which opens the door for leaders and organizations to learn from experience and history. Only through this process can leaders pause and ponder who they are, where they are going and what they need to do to get there. Reflection allows a leader to step back and consider all viewpoints, options and consequences. Through this practice, effective leaders can assess the current status of their own learning processes, their staff and their organization in comparison to where each should be moving. Gaps and opportunities, strengths and weaknesses, and needs and resources can all be identified and evaluated through reflection.

Reflection provides an opportunity to peacefully realize that one does not have all the answers and cannot succeed alone. Through reflection, leaders can learn not only from their own life experiences but also from those of their staff and colleagues and the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of their predecessors.

HONORING THE REALITY OF CHANGE

Perhaps it is fitting to recall the teachings of Gandhi when discussing the implications for leaders striving to help organizations succeed in turbulent times. As author Alan Axelrod wrote in *Gandhi, CEO: 14 Principles to Guide and Inspire Modern Leaders*:

“No enterprise ever simply arrives at its goal as a ship arrives at its dock. The idea of ‘maintaining’ an organization’s status is an illusion. It cannot be

done. There is, as Gandhi explained, always movement, always change. The great leadership issue, therefore, is one of navigation: the creation of purposeful, productive movement within an environment of movement. This requires continual vigilance and planning as well as a high level of energy. Gandhi embraced these requirements of leadership, from which, in any case, he saw no escape.”⁵

Ongoing reflection and a hopeful worldview that boldly embraces change are what will ground and sustain us, come what may. This important lesson is yet another that our foundresses have graciously passed on to us. We need only to remember.

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NOTES

1. Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).
2. Lorraine Slater, “Pathways to Building Leadership Capacity,” *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 36, no. 1 (January 2008): 55-69.
3. Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *The Wizard and the Warrior: Leading with Passion and Power* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).
4. Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
5. Alan Axelrod, *Gandhi, CEO: 14 Principles to Guide and Inspire Modern Leaders* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2010).

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Spring 2024, Vol. 105, No. 2
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