



HOW TO HONOR OPERATIONS

I think we forget the day-in, day-out "honoring of operations" that creates excellence in our institutions.

—A hospital administrator

In a sea of change, amidst the destruction of what healthcare used to be and the formation of a new age, a million times a day physicians, other care givers, and support persons work late, arrive in the emergency room at small hours to repair the face of a man beaten because he has HIV, tenderly clean the skin and sores of a street person, and hold the hand of an old man dying of cancer. In the best of places, high-quality care is delivered by a large team of healthcare providers. The systems they work within are so complicated that it is a miracle things go as well as they do.

Healthcare executives are no longer present as coaches, leaders, or the visible personification of their institution's values. Instead, they are engaged in a battle for survival, immersed in the compelling changes required to design a better delivery system. These challenging and difficult times create a powerful need to design the healthcare system of tomorrow—and to leave behind the roles of the past. A new role for chief executive officers (CEOs) is emerging. Out of the wrenching effort of the new leaders will come the transformation that must occur in the American healthcare system.



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Healthcare Leaders Have a New Role In the Changing System

BY ANDREA Y.
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LIVE THE MISSION

"Honoring operations" is a poignant phrase to describe a sum of intangibles that adds up to the moral goodness within many Catholic and mission-driven organizations. Care and healing are moral activities with roots in society's unchanging need, accompanied by honor for the healer. Healthcare does not result from management theory, job descriptions, medical school, schools of hospital administration, or policies and procedures; however, it consists of all these, in addition to other elements. The coordination of care and

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"Honoring operations" is a poignant phrase to describe a sum of intangibles that adds up to the moral goodness within many Catholic and mission-driven organizations. The coordination of care and excellence for those we serve happens at a microscopic level. It happens nearly, but not totally, independent of managers' delusions that they make it happen.

Healthcare leaders' most powerful act is to value the intangible gifts of those who carry out the tasks that add up to today's complex healing. By honoring operations, healthcare executives sustain excellence at the microscopic level, which is where it counts for the patient. Some suggestions for honoring operations are establishing inviolate core rituals of honor, forming one-on-one relationships with physicians, maintaining a core presence, communicating in the language of meaning, and speaking on the value of good medicine and good caring.



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What exactly are the intangibles? Do leaders of healthcare institutions have much to do with the miracle of care that we provide in our hospitals? Yes. It is captured in the phrase: "honoring operations." Leaders' and managers' behavior, time, and attention make a difference, but this difference is rarely ensconced within a job description. If it were, we would see unbusinesslike phrases such as "love the people," "walk around and talk to employees," "live the mission," "build a relationship of concern for doctors," or "talk about the mission and purpose of healing, so as to affirm care givers' worth."

One of the chief contributions to excellence in the delivery of care—which leaders are uniquely called to provide—is meaning. Meaningfulness—the belief that what we do has value—is the most powerful motivator of all. It is what care givers, physicians, nurses, and all those in healing work bring to their daily jobs and why they do what is tough, scary, unpalatable work for people, who at times are less than nice, cooperative, kind, or even conscious.

Those who have entered the healing profession by and large were inspired by the ancient purpose of healthcare—a ministry of intense devotion to a person's well-being and recovery from pain, disease, and injury—a noble purpose mostly forgotten in the talk about what is wrong with the system.

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Healthcare leaders' most powerful act is to value the intangible gifts of those who carry out the tasks that add up to today's complex, yet still tender, healing ministry. This act entails honoring operations through behaviors and presence, through decisions and discussions. It is attending to people's small problems, remembering rituals and celebrations, ensuring that other leaders are not so burdened by the awful challenge of change that they no longer have time to be enablers—

Leaders' most powerful act is to value the gifts of those who carry out the ministry.

to be present to solve small and big snafus and to chat with an employee returning from a long illness.

Honoring operations is reminding others about the worth of what they do. Society is picking apart the healthcare system beyond all reason. The impact on care givers—those who believe their sacrifice of time, vacation, and sleep is worthwhile—is immeasurable. Healthcare leaders want to retain their most honorable and caring people by underscoring the value, esteem, and honor associated with healing.

How do we do this? Here are some suggestions for honoring operations and affirming the value of the healing profession:

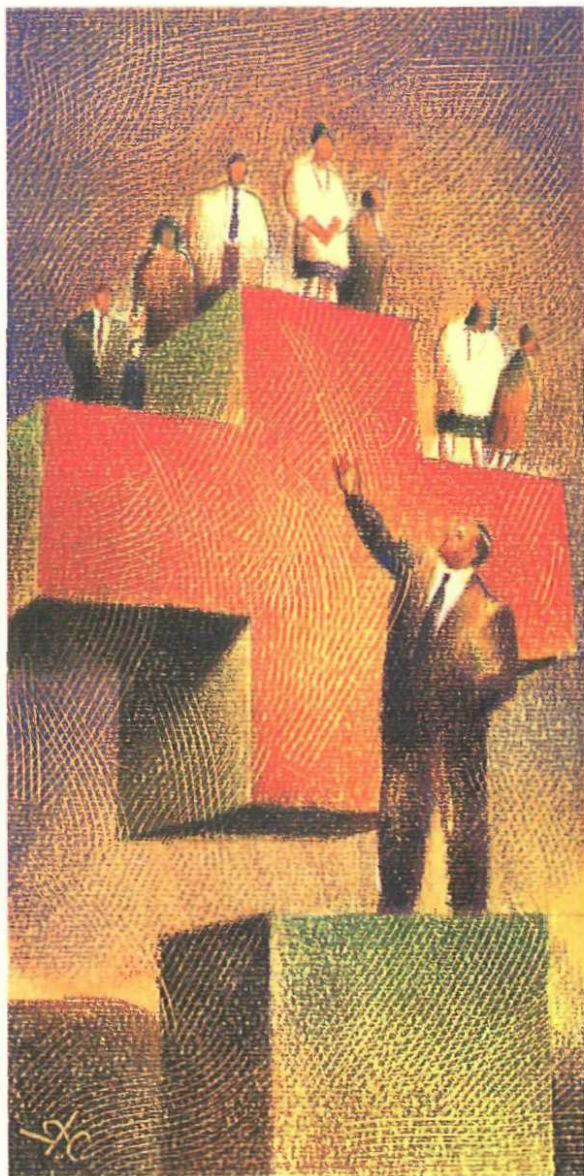
- *Establish inviolate core rituals of honor.* Each member of the executive management team

should make rounds once a month during off shifts; attend hospital ceremonies; and participate in his or her departments' life, for example, by attending every third department staff meeting. At Providence Hospital and Medical Center, Medford, OR, one inviolate rule is that at least one member of the executive team attends the funeral of a current or retired employee.

- *Form one-on-one relationships with physicians.* Persons who believe they can get doctors to cooperate to the degree required for transformation without honoring their healing profession—and caring about their issues and concerns—are incompetent. At Providence Hospitals and Medical Center, we stimulate physicians to adapt and do it successfully out of a relationship of affirmation and respect for what physicians do. More than at any time in the past, doctors need healthcare administrators' open acknowledgment of their role as physician and healer, capable of participating in the transformation of healthcare delivery.

One way to do this is to educate physicians on the likely delivery system changes. For example, the hospital can sponsor a quarterly evening forum where nationally recognized experts speak on healthcare delivery trends and the effect these trends

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may have on physicians.

• *Ensure that operational leadership is adequate and sufficient.* The role of the healthcare facility CEO has changed. Failing to address managed care, build relationships with community and with legislators, and design change is as risky as ignoring leaders' role in sustaining successful operations. CEOs must ensure that others with the same stature, voice, style, and focus on operations colead with them. Co-leaders could include chief operating officers, assistant administrators, and nursing leaders who exhibit a special interest in operations.

• *Maintain a core presence.* Although it may be difficult, the CEO must be present in organized ways, such as through employee forums, attendance at rituals, and leadership of at least one activity to keep in touch with employees or with patient care. This is not the time to move the CEO's office out of the hospital's mainstream. There is still no substitute for accessibility and availability to the spontaneous visit of physician, employee, or family, even if much of the problem solving is ultimately the purview of other trusted, competent executives on the team.

Given the intense nature of CEO's external efforts, occasioned by legislative involvement, payer marketing, managed care negotiations, and system development activities, it is easy to lose a sense of the tenor of the organization and its constituents. Chairing a task force on compassionate care (instead of simply expecting nursing leaders to do it) or serving on a committee to revise the performance appraisal system are some ways a CEO can continue the direct experience of the organization's community.

• *Communicate in the language of meaning to balance all the necessary communication about change.* At an

employee forum on managed care, for example, we finished up with a loose discussion—no structured teaching. We simply invited employees to ask about anything on their minds. We opened the session with an expression of appreciation and noted employees' specific accomplishments with respect to our mission.

In addition, we are renewing and strengthening our mission focus next year as part of an increased continuous quality improvement (CQI) effort. With all the change that CQI represents and pending reform legislation (and subsequent layoffs people fear), renewing our mission focus is the necessary balance. Because our mission so honors compassionate care, this renewal affirms the worth and value of the team members.

• *Speak on the value of good medicine and good caring.* Doing so will enable you, as one of those leaders caught up in performing your traditional role and creating a new delivery system, to go on for another day to create that compassionate, effective healthcare delivery system of tomorrow.

SUSTAINING EXCELLENCE

By honoring operations, healthcare executives sustain excellence at the microscopic level, which is where it counts for the patient. Honoring operations needs to be a watchword of our healthcare delivery system's boards, executives, and sponsors, even if at times the task seems nearly impossible. As healthcare executives take up their other imperative—to lead the organization through the transformation that must occur—they must recognize the continuing role of attending to their institutions' life and work and to the people who operate their healthcare facilities. That role is embodied in the phrase, "Take care of the crew and they will take care of the ship." □

SYNERGY

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States, the significant role of Catholic healthcare becomes more apparent. For example, as cooperation increases between healthcare providers, third-party payers, employers, and other healthcare agents, Catholic healthcare organizations are challenged to reassert a mission and values that will enable healthcare in the United States to be delivered both compassionately and competently. □

NOTES

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