

# Selecting the Cream Of the Crop (Part II)

BY JOHN W. GLASER, STD

**T**he importance of the "justice quotient" of potential candidates for chief executive officer in a Catholic hospital or healthcare system is undisputed. But in the real world, how does one evaluate such an elusive reality without being intrusive, unfair, subjective, or inappropriate?

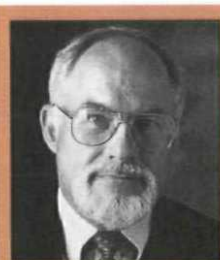
This column further explores some ideas that I touched on in an earlier article ("Selecting the Cream of the Crop," *Health Progress*, July-August 1989, pp. 86-89). In that article I suggested that selecting leaders was the single most significant ethical and mission-oriented activity that Catholic institutions engage in. I sketched some criteria for selecting leaders based on the U.S. bishops' 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*. And I suggested that further processes needed to be developed that would implement these criteria in the selection process. This article spells out some ways to evaluate candidates against criteria such as justice.

## A SLICE OF MISSION CRITERIA

Several qualifying remarks are important. First, what follows describes only part of the selection process. Many factors besides a person's commitment to justice demand attention, including demonstrated ability to manage large and complex organizations, familiarity with the complexities of the current healthcare environment, ability to deal with diverse constituencies, and financial expertise.

Substantial professional help exists in developing criteria for finding candidates who score high in such areas. But value-related qualities have proven more difficult to assess. Neither professional executive search firms nor Catholic organizations have developed satisfactory tools for identifying persons who possess them.

Second, the criteria discussed here are not "mission" criteria, as contrasted with "business" criteria. All these areas of concern—those already identified by executive search firms and the ones



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discussed in this article—are issues of mission. Financial health is not a business value that competes with mission values; it is a mission value that competes with other mission values. But when some mission values are specific and concrete and others remain general and abstract, emphasis goes to the concrete and specific. The dimensions of mission criteria that have proven more elusive, such as justice, need special attention.

Third, because of space limitations, this discussion is limited to some aspects of justice. This leaves most of the concrete work to be done by a search team, but it offers a working model for them to use.

## NEEDED: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

A major hurdle to developing a satisfying selection process is the absence of a conceptual model to guide its development. We have no consensus on the answers to the following questions:

- What do we want to evaluate: attitude, intention, values, virtue, behavior?
- Can the quality we want to evaluate be captured in any fair and objective way?
- Do we have the legal or moral license to probe such private spheres of life?

I believe that what we are trying to tap is the passionate concerns, the "real assents," of persons. These real commitments leave evidence of their presence in the lives of people, and we can objectively compare the extent and intensity of such evidence. Exploring candidates' value priorities is not only within our legal rights; it is a moral imperative of the highest order.

To clarify my theses, I offer a simple model grounded on two key principles: notional commitment differs from real commitment, and a person's past performance is evidence of his or her real commitments.

**Words Versus Lived Commitments** Cardinal Newman offers a helpful tool with his distinction between *notional assent* and *real assent*. He points to the same phenomenon captured in the challenge, Put

your money where your mouth is. Notional assent is the “yes” we *say*, our verbalized commitment. Real assent is the “yes” we *behave*, our lived commitment. Cardinal Newman is not pointing to insincerity or deception when he speaks of merely notional assent. He is simply recognizing that even the sincerest of us exhibit a gap between what we profess to strive for and what we actually do.

So, the first key principle in my model is this: In selecting leaders, we need to define and compare the candidates’ real commitments, or lived priorities. These real commitments are what has driven past evaluative judgments and behavior, and these same real commitments can be expected to shape future judgments and behavior.

**Tracking Lived Commitment** The second key principle of my proposal is this: Real commitments leave their footprints on the path of our lives, and they can be tracked.

For example, suppose we wanted to choose among candidates based on their real commitment to baseball. We would ask them for data that demonstrated their passion for baseball and discuss with them in detail the data they offered. To gather reasonably similar data, we might focus on questions such as these: How broad and deep is your knowledge of baseball—its history, heroes, and theories? How do you participate in baseball—watch, play, coach, or sponsor a team? How have you studied the game—what do you read, who are the authorities on the game? How have you worked for innovations, improvements, and the game’s future vigor?

If four candidates wrote their comments on such issues and a handful of knowledgeable persons then discussed their written comments with them, this search group would have some data with which to make objective comparisons of the candidates’ real commitment to baseball.

### **ASSESSING COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE**

But healthcare facilities are concerned with issues such as justice, dignity, and compassion. How can we gauge the real commitments to these less tangible realities? The short answer is we must get specific.

“Getting specific” has two stages. Stage one entails a specification of the values: What are they, and what do we mean by these terms? This was the focus of my earlier article, where I used the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter to develop some biblical criteria for leadership selection. But a

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healthcare organization that has developed a core value statement would use these values as the basis for further development of the selection process.

For example, the St. Joseph Health System of Orange, CA, has identified four key values: dignity, service, excellence, and justice. Under each of these values it has elaborated five or six further specific characteristics. For example, it defines the value of justice as follows:

We advocate for systems and structures that are attuned to the needs of the vulnerable and disadvantaged and that promote a sense of community among all persons.

Following this definition come six further specifications:

- We advocate at local, state, and national levels for health care policy that provides universal access to basic benefits, distributes burdens and benefits equitably, and promotes the responsible allocation of resources.
- We dedicate resources to the care of the medically poor.
- We develop systems and structures that attend to the needs of those at risk of discrimination because of age, gender, lifestyle, cultural or ethnic background, religious beliefs, or socioeconomic status.
- We recognize that individual, institutional, and societal interests are often in tension; in every case we strive to discern how the good of the whole can best be served.
- We conduct our business ethically, with integrity, honesty, fairness, and confidentiality.
- We develop a work environment that promotes mutual respect, participation, equitable compensation, growth, and effective use of talents.

Such definition and further clarification form the first level of value specification needed for building a process of leadership selection. The second phase of specification translates these elements of justice into instruments of inquiry and exploration. The example in the **Box** on p. 16 lists questions a search team might ask candidates to determine the level of their commitment to

justice. Based on their corporate value statement, the search team would have to decide which questions were appropriate and in what detail for a specific search.

The process of shaping and agreeing on the final instrument will take considerable time and energy on the part of all major constituents: the sponsors, trustees, and search committee (at the system and institutional level). But this work will be indispensable for mission implementation. Furthermore, it will demonstrate to the local community and potential candidates how seriously the organization takes its commitment to these values. It will also press all involved in the process to clarify their assumptions about these values' specific meanings. Finally, it will generate the kind of objective data needed for the comparative evaluation of candidates.

### TWO IMPORTANT INGREDIENTS

Two issues that are implicit in the above discussion need further elaboration.

**Motivation** This conceptual model pushes corporate processes into decidedly unfamiliar territory.

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The question of leaders' real commitment to key values is at once vital to corporate mission and a deeply personal issue. We tend to avoid rather than plunge directly into conversations about such matters. Because we do not have language, concepts, and evaluative categories for conducting such business, doing so can make us uncomfortable. Moreover, some candidates might be put off by attempts to explore their values, and some trustees, senior managers, and search committee members may have strong misgivings about such a process.

Given such disincentives to bold action, we need a strong push to proceed in this direction. We need to be motivated by the conviction that our fidelity to mission rises or falls with our selection of the right leaders.

**Conceptual Consensus** If we need strong motivation to overcome resistance, we also need conceptual clarity to provide direction. A conceptual model is a must. We need to share a common understanding that answers questions such as: What is it in the candidates that we want to assess and

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## EVALUATING ASSENT TO JUSTICE: A SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Candidate:

As you know from the literature you have received from us, we are deeply committed to the values of dignity, service, excellence, and justice. To weigh the relative strengths of our candidates, we are asking you to share with us your reflections on the following questions. We look forward to further discussion with you on these topics.

Our commitment to justice includes a special concern for the poor.

- Share with us some ways you have led your institutions to invest time, energy, and money in concern for the poor.
- What do you consider significant material—books, articles, reports—that you have read concerning healthcare of the poor?
- Are there programs that you have initiated or supported in the past five years on behalf of the poor?
- In your own analysis of the problem of healthcare for the poor, what direction do you think society needs to take to resolve this problem?
- What public figures, programs, and experts would you identify who deal with this issue insightfully?
- What do you consider a significant success and a significant failure in your efforts to deal with providing healthcare for the poor?
- Comment on the role that you think Medicaid should play in the next 10 years in addressing this problem.
- What approaches to providing care for the poor in other states or countries do you consider valuable?
- Do you have any further comments to make on this topic?  
A further dimension of our understanding of justice deals with the workplace. Please share with us your reflections on the following issues:
- Have you spent appreciable resources on consultants or programs that concern employees in the past five years? What programs and issues were dealt with? How would you evaluate their success?
- Have you read any materials that you believe display significant insight regarding justice in the current healthcare workplace?
- What do you consider the most important employee-oriented programs that you have initiated in the past five years?
- How would you describe your philosophy of the hospital as workplace?
- What do you understand by the term "participative management," and what do you see as its major strengths and weaknesses?
- What key ideas and principles characterize your approach to union organization in a hospital setting?

*Continued from page 16*

compare? To what extent can we do this objectively and fairly? What methods would be valid and effective in doing this? What overall process do we need to harness this complexity? How specific and extensive can or must we be?

Clearly, the model adopted need not be the one sketched here. But absent a shared conceptual model, success can only come by chance. Working without a consensual model would be like trying to assess an organization's financial health without any shared understanding of the laws and dynamics of organizational finance.

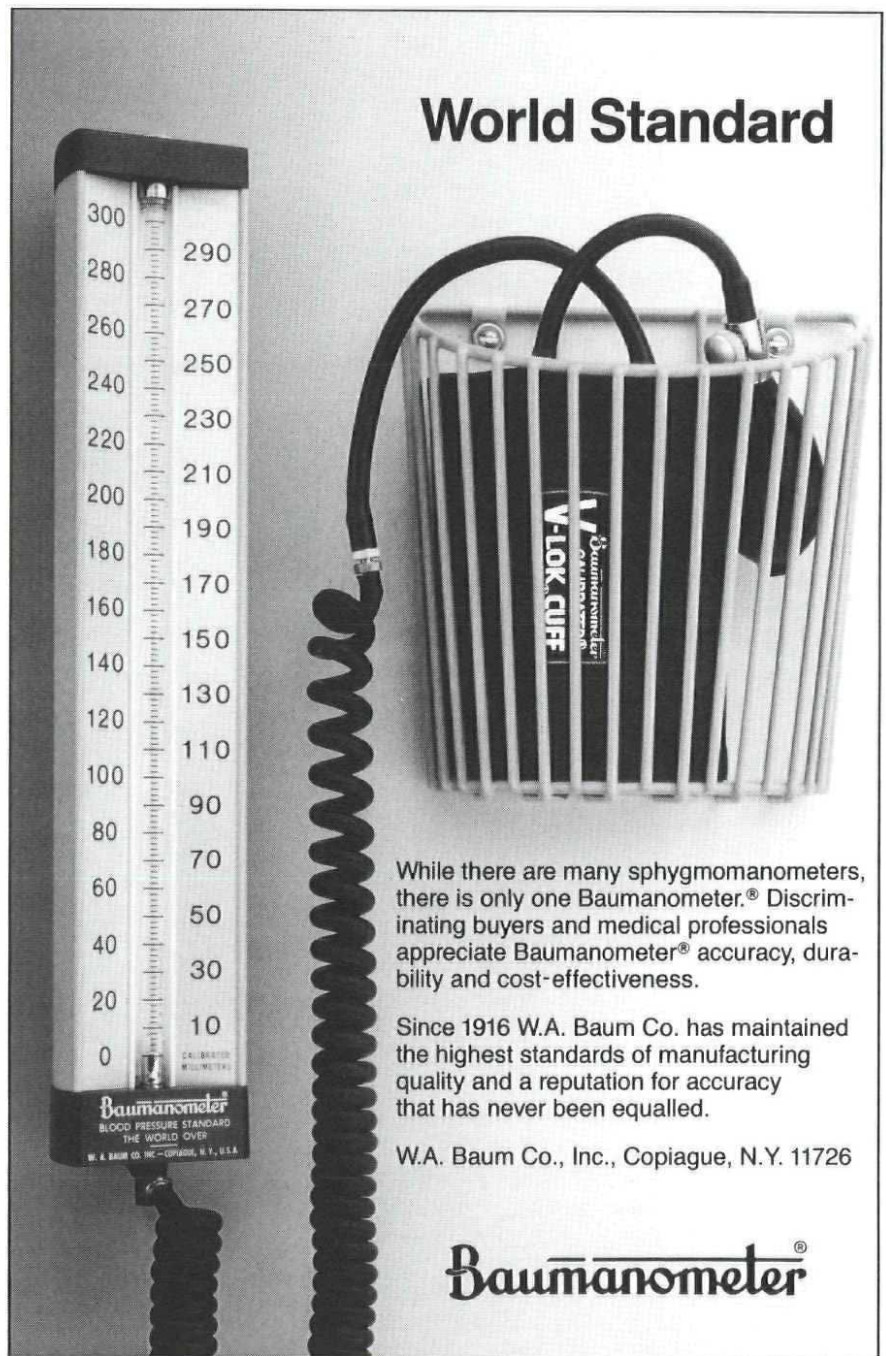
#### **AUDITING THE SELECTION PROCESS**

Because selection is so vital to mission, each organization should appoint a task force to audit its current search practices. The goal would be to evaluate the status quo and develop an agenda for improvement. To develop a plan, the task force would answer the following questions:

- Do we have a conceptual model that clarifies the essential elements of the search process? Is there a consensus among key constituents about this model?
- Do we specify values in enough detail to construct search tools?
- Do we translate these value specifics into tools that can help us assess the real commitments of candidates?
- Do we take time and invest the human and material resources necessary to deal with all the complexities involved?

#### **A VITAL ISSUE**

If the issue were less vital, we could settle for less than the obstacle course sketched here. Taking seriously the evaluation of candidates for leadership is risky, challenging, and labor intensive—for us and for the candidates. But it is territory that we must explore with all its risks because the cost of neglect is so punishing and the consequences of success reach so far and deep into the future. □



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