

# Leadership Formation: Choosing Between the Compass and the Checklist



**BY BRIAN YANOFCHICK**

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Learn more about Chris Lowney's thoughts on leadership formation in the March-April issue of *Health Progress*.

A few weeks ago, a colleague left a book on the desk in my office titled, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World* by Chris Lowney. The person who recommended the book to me called it a "quick read" at 330 pages. It was anything but quick.

In fact, it sparked many thoughts. Lowney's premise is that foundational "pillars" used by Ignatius Loyola as he formed the Jesuit community offer guidance to today's business organizations. Those four pillars are:

- Self-understanding
- Ingenuity
- Love
- Heroism

Lowney, a former Jesuit, explores each and attempts to demonstrate how they may still be the basis of successful leadership in today's organizations — faith-based or otherwise. He offers a thumbnail description of each pillar:

■ **Self-understanding:** "Leaders thrive by understanding who they are and what they value, by becoming aware of unhealthy blind spots or weaknesses that can derail them, and by cultivating the habit of continuous self-reflection and learning."

■ **Ingenuity:** "Leaders make themselves and others comfortable in a changing world. They eagerly explore new ideas, approaches, and cultures rather than shrink defensively from what lurks around life's corner. Anchored by non-negotiable principles and values, they cultivate the 'indifference' that allows them to adapt confidently."

■ **Love:** "Leaders face the world with a confident, healthy sense of themselves as endowed with talent, dignity, and the potential to lead. They find exactly these same attributes in others and passionately commit to honoring and unlocking the potential they find in themselves and in others. They create environments bound and energized by loyalty, affection, and mutual support."

■ **Heroism:** "Leaders imagine an inspiring future and strive to shape it rather than passively watching the future happen around them. Heroes

extract gold from the opportunities at hand rather than waiting for golden opportunities to be handed to them."

An interesting insight early in the book relates to the plethora of "successful leadership" books that are based on lists. They lead one to believe that completing the checklist of behaviors, courses, programs or whatever, will turn us into successful, motivated leaders. Yet, he uses the metaphor of the journey to indicate that checklists do little to get us where we want to go. A compass does help, though. A compass shows direction and keeps us on the path. The checklists are only a beginning and are useless on the journey itself. Keeping this image in mind, the Jesuits' four pillars operate less as a checklist and more like points on the compass, all of which give us perspective on where we stand on the journey at any given time.

This "compass" becomes all the more important as we witness the continued growth of lay leadership in the mission role across the Catholic health care ministry. As this has happened, many Catholic health systems have begun to do extensive work to re-define the expectations and competencies for mission leaders. This is true not only because of who is filling the role, but also because of the continuing desire to assure the Catholic identity of our work.

As a national ministry, we are approaching a new threshold in the development of the mission role. The CHA mission leader survey completed in 2006 showed that 51 percent of mission leaders are vowed religious compared to 88 percent in 1993 when the previous survey was taken. Anecdotally, it appears that more new mission leaders are being hired from within the ranks of current employees. These new leaders have stronger backgrounds in operational experience than in theological study. Evidence shows movement toward a generation of mission leaders who are not and *never have been* vowed religious or ordained priests. Less evident, but more important, is the trend toward a generation of mission leaders who have had little or no direct contact with the religious who founded their health ministries.



This reality brings us back to the images of the compass and the checklist. Some health systems have made significant commitments to the formation of their lay leaders. Others have begun to build programs that will grow in strength throughout time. As these very necessary programs grow, it will become all the more important to monitor their focus. Are they functioning more like checklists . . . another version of tasks to be accomplished over a period of time, but with little impact on the journey after? Or, are they designed to help participants identify the personal compass that guides their work each day and influences their decisions?

We know the formational methods used by the vowed religious, who founded our ministries, will not be adequate to form lay leadership. While we will work to identify new methods of formation, we must never allow ourselves to abandon the search for women and men who, like them, lead personal and professional lives guided by an inner-compass that is oriented toward unselfish, compassionate service to others. The four pillars that Lowney identified as core to the Jesuit way of ministry easily apply to every vowed religious congregation who are sharing their ministry with new lay lead-

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ers. These characteristics imbue the stories we tell of their early efforts and of the individuals who stand out as heroes in our tradition. There are lay women and men serving in our ministry now who model these pillars in the way they care for those we serve.

And yet we know we need more. Wilson Miscamble, CSC, writing in the Sept. 10, 2007, issue of *America*, ("The Faculty 'Problem': How Can Catholic Identity be Preserved?"), spoke of a "tipping point" of Catholic influence within the Catholic education ministry. He saw this related specifically to the number of Catholic faculty in a university department that serves to maintain its Catholic identity. This insight has application to the leadership of any Catholic health ministry.

The point may be debated within Catholic health care on the necessity of Roman Catholics appointed to leadership positions in health systems, hospitals or other facilities. Yet, given the unique dynamic of compassionate care that is the "true north" of Catholic health care, it is essential that we identify and nurture leaders who themselves are guided by the same compass as that of our foundresses and founders. Self-understanding, ingenuity, love and heroism are the points that orient anyone who would aspire to succeed them in this ministry. There is indeed a "tipping point" in the kind of leaders who serve to continue a ministry, or send it off in another direction never intended by its founders.

As the work of leadership formation continues to develop within the health care ministry, the 16th century wisdom of St. Ignatius Loyola may speak to us in fresh ways today. Let our future work be less about checklists and more about the compass. ■

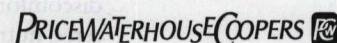
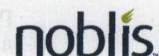
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