

Gary Mecklenburg Talks about the Qualities in Leaders that He Admires, the Relevancy of Mentoring, and Walking the Talk



NCHL is proud to present the 2006 National Healthcare Leadership Award to Gary A. Mecklenburg, retired president and CEO of Northwestern Memorial HealthCare. As a co-recipient of this year's award, Gary is recognized for his leadership at both Northwestern and the healthcare field for building effective teams, developing the next generation of healthcare leaders, bringing technological innovation to the field, and raising the bar for leadership for all

of healthcare. We salute Gary and thank him for his commitment to improve the quality of the nation's healthcare.

Gary A. Mecklenburg

Retired President and CEO
Northwestern Memorial
HealthCare, Chicago

Personals

Age: 60
Married to Lynn for 35 years
2 children and 3 grandchildren

Education

BA Anthropology 1968
Northwestern University
MBA with Concentration
in Hospital Administration 1970
University of Chicago

Career

University of Wisconsin Hospitals
1970-1977
Stanford University Hospital
and Clinics 1977-1980
St. Joseph's Hospital and Franciscan
Health Care, Inc. 1980-1985

Northwestern Memorial Hospital
1985-2003

Northwestern Memorial HealthCare
1986-2006

Waud Partners, Inc. 2006-Present

Kellogg Graduate School of
Management 2006-Present

Nonprofit Boards (current)

National Center for Healthcare
Leadership

Institute for Healthcare
Improvement

American Hospital Association
Services, Inc.

Health Forum (Chairman)

Forprofit Boards

Becton, Dickinson and Co.

Regency Hospital Co.

Acadia Healthcare Co.

Hospitalists Management Group

Among Gary Mecklenburg's many contributions to the healthcare field has been his commitment to developing talent and mentoring young people. As a national leader, his sense of responsibility as a role model and to inspire future generations of healthcare leaders was nurtured early in his personal and professional development. He can trace it back to his earliest role models—his parents who were active volunteers in the community including helping develop support for a new hospital in suburban Chicago. Along the way, Gary worked and studied with some of the industry's most renowned executives who motivated him to take the time to teach, to show, to instruct, and to inspire.

What qualities in healthcare leaders have been most important to you?

The executives that have impressed me are those who not only are intelligent and have confidence in their managerial skills, but also who are true to their personal and professional beliefs. Great leaders have strong values at their core including a deep sense of responsibility for achieving the missions of their organizations. I was fortunate to work with some truly great leaders early in my development.

Could you tell us about some of these individuals?

My first part-time job in healthcare was at Central DuPage Hospital where a young CEO, Jim Anderson, was the founding hospital administrator. Jim is a great example of how a values-based leader can develop a successful, community-focused organization. He remains a close friend to this day. At the University of Chicago, where I completed my graduate work, I was inspired by George Bugbee who not only led the program, but also surrounded himself with very talented graduate students and faculty. Most went on to distinguished careers in hospitals or academia. My early mentors and bosses were exceptional, including Gail Warden at Presbyterian-St. Luke's in Chicago and Jim Varnum at the University of Wisconsin. My summer residency with Gail introduced me to strategic thinking and the intricacies of managing a complex medical center. He also taught me about my professional responsibility to help develop the next generation of hospital leaders, including diverse candidates.

Is that relevant in today's environment?

It is not only relevant but essential. Unfortunately, too few executives accept that responsibility. One of the great tragedies in healthcare today is that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for young people to receive mentoring. In the 1960s and 1970s almost every hospital administrator and his institution offered an administrative residency both to develop his administrative staff and to fulfill a commitment as an alumnus of his graduate program. Today mentoring is less prevalent. Many healthcare leaders—whose jobs have become increasingly complex—may feel they don't have the time for teaching, and many CEOs today do not come from a traditional MHA graduate program where fellowships are stressed. Some cite cost as a factor.

How did you find time for mentoring while running a prominent medical center?

No question—finding time for mentoring is difficult. There are only so many hours in a day. But mostly you have to believe in the premise that there is nothing more important to the success of an organization than the development of talent; and it needs to be a priority in an executive's time allocation.

How does Northwestern Memorial approach mentoring?

Northwestern Memorial believes that teaching and mentoring are core components of its mission as an academic medical center. Within that context, one priority is youth development programs that bring scores of high school students to the hospital to learn about health careers. There is an emphasis on diversity, and I am very proud of the number of bright young minority students who have had a relationship with NMH. In one sense this commitment is altruistic, because there is a sense of responsibility to help young people in the community. But, it's also in the long-term best interests of the organization to get

youth “hooked” on health careers in grade school and high school as a way to expand the future healthcare workforce. Additionally, most of the hospital's executives teach and mentor students and staff at all career stages.

Under your leadership, Northwestern Memorial earned a reputation for excellence. Can you talk about how you helped lead it to success?

It is important to remember that the organization is the second oldest hospital in Chicago—140 years of history. My 21 years as CEO is only a small part of its impressive traditions. When I arrived in 1985, NMH was a respected organization, but it had not fulfilled its considerable potential to become one of the nation's truly great teaching hospitals. My job as the leader was to provide focus. Our first priority was on fundamentals—day-to-day operations, patient care, financial management, and staffing. We clarified our sense of purpose through a re-statement of our mission, and we developed a strategic plan that not only helped us decide what we would do but also what we wouldn't do. After clarity of mission, vision, and strategy, we focused on developing great staff. We built a great management team surrounded by the best people we could find including great physicians. While hospitals are among the most complicated organizations that exist, at its core, healthcare is a simple business: “people taking care of people.” Northwestern Memorial's secret to success has been high performing and committed staff at all levels.

What have been your management and leadership styles?

One definition of management is getting things done through others. If you hire great people, give them clarity of direction and let them go, amazing things happen. Much of leadership is about vision, purpose and values. A great leader has a sense of responsibility to fulfill the mission of the organization, and his/her starting point is interpreting and communicating that sense of purpose to others. Leaders must live the mission in their actions and behaviors—“walk the talk.” It all goes back to being a role model

