

Michael Dowling Talks about His Penchant for Innovation and the Necessity for Investing in Talent

The National Center for Healthcare Leadership is pleased to present the 2011 Gail L. Warden Leadership Excellence Award to Michael J. Dowling, President and Chief Executive Officer of North Shore-LIJ Health System for his innovative and visionary leadership that has inspired a culture of organizational excellence. By emphasizing continuous learning, mentoring, talent development, transparency, and accountability, Mr. Dowling has earned a sterling reputation for challenging North Shore-LIJ to seek constant improvement while never losing sight of its patient-centered mindset and its commitment to population health. NCHL applauds Mr. Dowling for his bold initiatives that have led to lasting and significant contributions to develop future healthcare leaders and for bringing high-quality and accessible care to his communities.

MICHAEL J. DOWLING

President and Chief Executive Officer, North Shore-LIJ Health System

Education

Bachelor of Arts, University College Cork (UCC), Ireland
Higher Diploma, Education, UCC Master of Social Work, Fordham University

Honorary Degrees

Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY Dowling College, Oakdale, NY

North Shore-LIJ Health System

President and CEO: 2002–present
Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer: 1997–2002
Senior Vice President, Hospital Services: 1995–1997

Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, Senior Vice President: 1995

New York State Positions

Commissioner, Department of Social Services: 1993–1994
Director, Health, Education and Human Services: 1991–1993
Deputy Secretary to the Governor, Human Services: 1988–1991
Deputy Commissioner, Division of Income Maintenance: 1983–1988

Fordham University Graduate School of Social Services

Assistant Dean: 1981–1983 Director, Tarrytown Campus: 1979–1981

Honors and Awards

2011 Gail L. Warden Leadership Excellence Award, National Center for Healthcare Leadership
2011 CEO Information Technology Award,
Modern Healthcare and the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society
National Human Relations Award, American Jewish Committee
Distinguished Public Service Award
State University of New York's Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy
Outstanding Public Service Award, Mental Health Association of New York State
Outstanding Public Service Award, Mental Health Association of Nassau County
Alfred E. Smith Award, American Society for Public Administration
Ellis Island Medal of Honor

Boards and Other Affiliations

Chairman, North American Board, Smurfit School of Business University College, Dublin, Ireland
Board Member and Fellow, New York Academy of Medicine
Board Member, Institute for Healthcare Improvement
Board Member, Holocaust Center of Nassau County
Past Chairman and Current Board Member, National Center for Healthcare Leadership
Past Chairman, Greater New York Hospital Association
Past Chairman, Healthcare Association of New York State
Past Chairman, League of Voluntary Hospitals of New York

About North Shore-LIJ Health System

As the recipient of the National Quality Forum's 2010 National Quality Healthcare Award, North Shore-LIJ is recognized for providing high quality care to a service area of 7 million people in Long Island, Manhattan, Queens, and State Island. It is the nation's second-largest non-profit secular health system with more than 4 million annual patient contacts, 5,600 beds, more than 43,000 employees, 15 hospitals, more than 200 ambulatory care centers, and an operating budget of more than \$6 billion. Its Feinstein Institute for Medical Research, which has performed 1,200 clinical trials, ranks among the nation's top six percent of all institutions that receive funding from the National Institute of Health. In 2011 it opened the Hofstra North Shore-LIJ School of Medicine, New York State's first new allopathic medical school in more than 40 years.



Michael J. Dowling traces the evolution of his innovative thinking to growing up in challenging circumstances in Ireland in the 1950s, where he learned that the desire to make things better and the willingness to take risks can lead to extraordinary outcomes. That same mindset put him on a career path toward leading North Shore-LIJ

Health System, the largest health system in New York State, where he has made innovation the hallmark of his nine-year term as president and CEO. Throughout his career Mr. Dowling has stressed the importance of developing leaders; that philosophy became the basis for a paper he drafted in 2000 outlining a comprehensive leadership institute that would promote continuous learning and improvement. He envisioned an institute that would inspire people to ask, "How can I do things differently? How do I create a better future?" Mr. Dowling wanted a place that would encourage innovation as a predicate to leadership. This concept became the blueprint for North-Shore-LIJ's Center for Learning and Innovation (CLI), establishing North Shore as a pioneer in bringing cutting-edge corporate university concepts to healthcare, and becoming one of the health system's most esteemed accomplishments.

Q. What was the genesis of the idea that later became the Center for Learning and Innovation?

A. In my prior lives I was always perturbed that when executives talked about infrastructure investment or their core assets, they talked about bricks and mortar, or IT, or new hospitals and new buildings. But the main thing missing was investment in human assets. The most valuable asset that organizations have today is their employees and to have a great organization you have to invest in your people or you won't be good in the long term. I always felt that if I had the opportunity I would figure out a way to invest in those human assets that made sense, not just training programs, but create a learning organization that could drive the momentum of cultural change.

Q. What did previous training programs lack?

A. There might be a little training, but it was never connected to the business strategies and goals, never targeted at the right people, it wasn't organized, and it seemed like a lot of wasted effort and money. You might send Johnny to a training program, but there was no plan for Johnny over the long term. Or people were promoted into new roles without the right training or support to help them succeed. I envisioned a place that would focus on creating a culture of continuous learning and improving our health system. Leadership is about innovation and I wanted that to be at the core of the institute. When I became CEO we partnered with GE and Harvard Business School and we started the Center for Learning and Innovation. Kathy Gallo was named to head it—she retains that position of Chief Learning Officer today. I picked her because I wanted somebody who had never done this kind of work before. I wanted fresh thinking and a fresh approach to people development.

Q. How do you spark innovation?

A. You always have to be in a transformational mode so that you are always thinking about how to change what you are doing currently to make it better. An anticipatory attitude is very, very important. Then you need to think ahead—five or ten years. You must carefully pick your timing for doing things—you have to know when to do what. In healthcare you are dealing with multiple constituencies, so you have to think about how to change things without causing unnecessary disruption. But mostly it's about the right people in the right jobs who understand teamwork, cooperation, collaboration, and who live and breathe our customer-centric mentality.

Q. North Shore-LIJ has had a close working relationship with NCHL for many years. What is the connection?

A. The work of NCHL is very consistent with our philosophy that is focused on outcomes, affordability, and serving the health of the whole community. My staff worked closely with NCHL as it developed its leadership model and we have found many ways to collaborate. One of their most unique programs provides for “C-suite” sharing, which gives you exposure to other ideas and allows you see something different, which can add a layer of comfort when you are taking on the risk of trying something new. That's important today because if you are going to lead a culture change you must take risk.

Q. You assumed the CEO position at North Shore-LIJ during a series of mergers. That must have presented a hefty set of challenges.

A. All challenges are opportunities that can be taken advantage of if you have the right people with the appropriate skills. Mergers, at their core, are about bringing people together, building trust and breaking down silos and getting people to see the larger vision. Our goal was to create a system that was integrated, administratively and clinically, and not be a collection of facilities that did not work together. We have succeeded to this point because we put the right leadership in place and replaced or reassigned those that were not committed to the vision. We have had a 100% change over in the leadership of all of our facilities and business units over the past decade.

Q. How do you get everyone to move in the same direction to a new culture?

A. I am old fashioned about this but I believe in direct and face-to-face communication. You have to really know your people and build relationships. You have to choose people not only on the basis of where they got their degrees from or what their grade-point average was, but on values like passion, teamwork, relationship skills, etc. And, of course, to their overall commitment to the vision. This is one reason why I meet each week with **all** new employees—usually about 100 people. I emphasize the values and remind them that they have more than a job—they have a responsibility and an obligation. I want them to understand that they are not putting widgets on shelves, they are helping people to get healthier and improve their lives. We also create multiple opportunities for staff and leadership to interact, share, engage and build trust.

Q. Recently, you faced a test of your leadership when you were forced to evacuate three hospitals in the face of Hurricane Irene. How do you plan for something like this and how do you execute?

A. Our success was the result of many years of planning. For the past decade, we have been building the capability to be able to respond—and respond quickly—to any kind of emergency or crisis. We have a very disciplined structure and process. There is absolutely no panic. Everyone knows what to do—from central command to

our facility command centers. It is very high-tech and teamwork driven and led by highly-trained individuals. We also have our own medical transport system—one of the largest in the U.S. We have over 100 superbly equipped ambulances capable of transporting the most seriously ill patients. During Irene, we safely evacuated 1000 of our own patients in about fifteen hours and we helped evacuate patients from hospitals and nursing homes not in our health system.

Q. How do you find the right people?

A. I have made recruitment and leadership development a major part of my role as CEO. You cannot, I believe, be a leader if you don't have a commitment to invest in the core assets of your organization. We have centralized all recruitment and recruitment staff follows strict criteria on the kinds of individuals we desire in the organization. Last year, we on-boarded over 5000 new people all going through a very organized process by which they get acquainted with the organization—its goals, business philosophy, values, and behaviors. As mentioned earlier, I meet all of them in a group each Monday at 8:00 AM for two and a half hours. We also identify high potential employees and have them in a leadership development program. This also includes physicians. We have a “corporate university,” (CLI) with extensive learning opportunities including state-of-the-art simulation. Employees are also encouraged to pursue further degree training. For example, we have graduated about 75 nurses with their DNs in the past three years.

Q. How does succession planning fit into leadership development?

A. We take succession planning very seriously because I believe the promotion process should be open and transparent. We have lists of people who we think can move into leadership positions. Our administrators have lists of people who they think could replace them. We meet in November and discuss this list and everybody knows who is on the list behind them. This transparency is important. It promotes teamwork, leadership development, and communication. If we are going to do an excellent job of preparing people to be promoted, then we need to be transparent.

Q. In a rapidly changing industry, what keeps you up at night?

A. The danger of complacency. The danger of believing you are good and you can relax. It's important to be a little dissatisfied continuously; it pushes you to get better. And it's important that none of our efforts become disparate projects that are disjointed from our overall strategy. The work we do in leadership development and improving our customer-centric business is part of our DNA.

Q. You just opened a medical school in conjunction with Hofstra University. How are you bringing your penchant for innovation to that setting?

A. How we train physicians to be excellent practitioners and leaders in healthcare of the future is extremely important—if not one of the most important things we do. We have to break with the practices of the past. Our curriculum is unique. Students get four years of clinical training **and** four years of science. During the first nine weeks, they are trained as EMTs, ride the ambulances, and learn how to engage directly with patients. They learn by doing—which will continue for the full four years. It is an exciting responsibility and has universal support across our health system.

Q. You stress mentoring; were you mentored?

A. I learned a lot from New York Governor Mario Cuomo. He had passion and commitment and an unbelievably analytical mind. He had the ability to not only look ahead, but to look around corners. He gave me many opportunities and most of the things he asked me to do I didn't have a clue how to do. But he gave me a chance to do them. To this day when I ask someone to take on a job, I never ask if they did the job before. If you only go to people who have done something before, you will never get anything new.

Q. What drives you?

A. I suffer from what some would say is a major defect but I think can be a great advantage: I am never fully satisfied. My background taught me to never believe that something cannot be done—that everything is possible and you should always be raising the bar. I have been lucky and as a result, I believe I have a responsibility to constantly try to make things better. We only travel this road once—so why not make the best of it.