

ASK A CEO

An Interview with Michael Dowling, CEO of Northwell Health

Greg Demetriou: Welcome everybody to the first “Ask A CEO” video interview with Mr. Michael Dowling, the CEO and President of Northwell Health. This is a major advance for our program because Mr. Dowling has said he would be happy to talk about his experience of what it takes to be a successful CEO. A major corporation, Northwell Health, is one of the biggest employers on Long Island and regionally as well. So, Mr. Dowling, thank you very much.

Michael Dowling: Thank you. It’s a pleasure.

Greg Demetriou: So, we’ll ask some easy questions and mostly this is going to go out to people who are aspiring to become successful CEOs. So in no order of importance I have a few.

Michael Dowling: Sure. Not a problem.

Greg Demetriou: Northwell has become a powerhouse both nationally, regionally and so forth. Now, I know from some of the things that I’ve seen that culture is very important to you. Can you tell us a) why and b) how you go about bringing that about?

Michael Dowling: Well, culture is one of the most important things for any organization. You know, as people have often said it’s a phrase that has been used many times that culture eats strategy for lunch and the culture is all about the personality of the organization, it’s about how you work together, how you display yourself internally and externally and if you don’t have a positive culture and people are not all rowing in the same direction and are not giving the impression or acting as if they’re on the same team, then you’re going to be in trouble to begin with. So, culture is key.

Greg Demetriou: How do you do that with an organization that has over 60,000 members?

Michael Dowling: It takes time. It starts with sending the right messages about the values that the organization should believe in which is teamwork, interdisciplinary work... you know I mentioned teamwork, passion, commitment that customer skills are very important and you do it in part by the types of people you hire. This is why it takes a long period of time. It’s not just the leadership in the organization. It’s everybody that you hire you try to make sure that you screen out those people that you don’t believe have the value sets and the behavior skills that you want in your organization. For example this is why I meet with all new employees every Monday morning. I’ve

been doing this every Monday for 13 years. Every new employee that is hired here, I meet with on Monday mornings.

Greg Demetriou: That's incredible.

Michael Dowling: Yeah.

Greg Demetriou: That's really incredible.

Michael Dowling: It's an ongoing and a never-ending process. It's not like a project that you start and end. It continues.

Greg Demetriou: Not only in the healthcare industry, but as an organization as a whole, you need to make significant changes to keep the ball rolling. In your position of such a big organization, how could you translate that into smaller organizations, CEOs that are up and coming and need to make really significant decisions? How would you tell them to do that?

Michael Dowling: As a CEO in an organization you are not managing the organization. You're leading it. There's a difference. People manage for day to day, but you lead for the future. Whether you're a small organization or a large one, what you have to be thinking about all the time is where do you want to be three to five years out? You take into consideration the current circumstances that exist, the competitive market place and what government might or might not be doing. For most people government is a major player. Then you think about where you need to be and you keep focusing on the long term. You keep pushing continuously and not get focused only on the day to day. The short term thinking is the thing that kills not only the creation of culture, but kills the organization and its ability to be successful.

Greg Demetriou: In a new hire, what do you look for in terms skillsets. Beyond that, is there are a key trigger for you that says this is a person that I want?

Michael Dowling: The most important thing even in my view beyond skills is attitude. You can learn a skill if you have the right attitude. If you have all the skill in the world and terrible attitude you're dead from day one. Hire for attitude and you teach skill.

Greg Demetriou: Interesting.

Michael Dowling: And that's a key underlying principle.

Greg Demetriou: I've heard you answer this one before, but I'm going to ask it anyhow because I think it's important to the readers and the viewers to hear this.

We're all influenced by certain people during our lifetime either family, historical, mentors. Could you tell us about who your biggest influencer was?

Michael Dowling: There's a couple. One is an individual where I grew up in Ireland, as everybody can clearly determine, was somebody that constantly told me that I couldn't be successful. So,

many people will take that criticism as a negative. I took it as a positive because it built up this competitive spirit despite the fact that people think you can't be successful. You decide that you're going to be. That's a major influencer if you deal with it the right way. This is why criticism, whether it's direct criticism or indirect criticism you can turn on its head to be a positive. The second person, obviously, as I mentioned many times before is my mother who was a major influence because she always made learning an important part of our lives as kids even though we didn't have much material benefits as a kids, hardly any at all quite frankly, but there were always books around. So, I have love of learning and I still to this day read about three books a month and the third person was somebody that I worked for 12 years which was Mario Cuomo, the Governor, former Governor of State of New York. Those are the three people, but everybody you interact with and everybody you meet with influences you in some way or another. You just got to be open minded enough and curious enough to be able to learn from everybody that you interact with.

Greg Demetriou: That's exactly why we're here today because it's very important for people in other industries and other up and comers to hear what it really took, how you actually got here because everybody's story is different. So, that's really important to our readers and our viewers now. Personal philosophy. I don't want to make it what word you live by, but is there a touchstone that is really Michael Dowling?

Michael Dowling: What I would like to think is that you're consciously trying to do the right thing. Do what's right and do it well and make sure that you're not just driven by benefits to yourself personally, but driven by the benefits that you can contribute to a larger community. Some people will say I'm in the business only to make money. It's about me. You've got to be in the business and understand the whole of purpose. What is the purpose in life... which is to do well and to do good for others and if you can combine those two attributes you've got a winning attitude.

Greg Demetriou: You make yourself very accessible to the broader business and regular communities. How do you see that as being as important as it is to you? What is the reason why Michael Dowling, CEO of Northwell Health needs to be out in the community?

Michael Dowling: People have to know who you are. You can't hide behind the closed door. You can't hide behind technology. You've got to be personable. You've got to be make it and this builds culture, by the way, is to make sure that person to person contact is important despite all of the new technologies that we're currently being dealt with and that we have to deal with, at the end of the day it's a face to face communication. Being visible, being out there demonstrating to people that you're a human being, that you're just not the boss. You know, like I tell people all the time, everybody puts on their pants the same way in the morning. So, whether your title is here or whether you had no title at all, titles don't make you important and titles don't create leadership. Actions create leadership. If you want to personify the concept of leadership, you've got to act like it and one of the things you have to do is be accessible, treat the person who parks the car as well as you would treat the person who is your top surgeon, because the person who parks the car is a contributor just like the surgeon is a contributor, different ways maybe, but they're all important and they have to know that you care. People want to belong to something and they want to identify with something and as a leader they want to believe in what you believe in. They want to follow you because they believe you. They don't want to follow you just because you tell them to follow you. They have believe in you and believe in what the purpose is that you're trying to promote and

if you can do that and you can only do that by personal contacts. That's why I met with employees all the time. To me it is absolutely key. Be a regular human being. Don't let the title get to your head, don't let the office get to your head, don't think you're special because, quite frankly, you're not that special.

Greg Demetriou: You're a very, busy man. We're a small little CEO outlet. Why is it important for you to take time out of your busy day? What value does this add to Michael Dowling, the CEO of Northwell?

Michael Dowling: Well, other than the fact that you're a terrific individual.

Greg Demetriou: Well, thank you so much.

Michael Dowling: And that you do fantastic work.

Greg Demetriou: Thank you.

Michael Dowling: But it's part of being accessible to everybody. We make the time. When people ask me how do you have the time to meet all new employees in the morning? I say what's more important? Who does all the work? I sit up and take an award at an event and say look at me I'm great, but I didn't do the work that deserved the award. I accepted the award on behalf of the people who do the work and so that whole orientation is very important. I'm accessible all the time. I have an open-door policy. Employees have my phone number. Any employee can contact me.

Any employee that asks for a meeting, at whatever level in the organization, I meet them all the time. I never say no because I understand who's important and while I have a role to play and do my best to play it, the organization is just not about me. It's about the collective.

Greg Demetriou: The people are not just functionaries.

Michael Dowling: Right.

Greg Demetriou: They're part of the well that makes this place work.

Michael Dowling: Yes, and they've got to understand that their contributions are important and that you respect them for their contributions and that you're a human being just like them. It goes back to what I said a few moments ago. People often say I now have a title therefore I'm a leader. Some people with titles call themselves leaders and they should never be in that position at all.

Greg Demetriou: I was going to finish that sentence for you.

Michael Dowling: Okay? I mean because they get oh, my God. They walk around look at my CV, look at my résumé. Look at me and that's a lot of garbage.

Greg Demetriou: Aren't I important?

Michael Dowling: I'm important. No. When you think you're important you just proven to everybody else that you're not.

Greg Demetriou: I have a sign in my office from my brother, may he rest in peace, and it says, "I'm the boss. That's why." It's a phrase he never ever uttered in his whole life and we used to laugh about it every time we saw it in his office, "I'm the boss. That's why."

Michael Dowling: It's like people who think they're the boss at home. My old phrase is... I'm the boss in my own house and I have my wife's permission to say so.

Greg Demetriou: What's retirement look like to you?

Michael Dowling: I have a hard time conceptualizing the concept of retirement. Retirement to me is another chapter in the book. It might be a different story, but retirement assumes an end. To me there is no end. You contribute as long as your faculties allow you to contribute. You turn the page and move onto another chapter. You've got to know when to get out also. When you're in a role you've got to know when it is you've got to hand it to somebody else. This doesn't mean you retire in the traditional sense. It means that you move from here and you do something else. If retirement means sitting at home putting my feet up on a chair, I say just shoot me.

Greg Demetriou: In a word...what describes you?

Michael Dowling: What describes me? I would say...hmm...that's a hard one. I'd say, a positive attitude.

Greg Demetriou: What does your legacy look like? What do you think your legacy should be?

Michael Dowling: I would like people to think that you're somebody that worked hard, did the right thing and made some kind of a difference, but be humble about it. I mean, have a sense of humility about your contributions because every contribution that you make is going to be improved upon by the next person who comes along hopefully, but be able to sit back with some pride about what it is you've done.

Greg Demetriou: What are the attributes of leadership.

Michael Dowling: There's one other attribute, that you mentioned and that is, I think that one of the most important attributes of leadership is perseverance. You're going to have bad days and bad weeks and people play victim and they say I can't succeed because of XYZ. I think that's something I don't believe in. They also quit because things get tough. This concept of grit, hanging in there and not giving up, sticking with it because things change, circumstances evolve, and the opportunity may not arise today, but may arise next week. You've got to be around to take advantage of it when it does.

If you have a curious mind, believe in the concept of lifelong learning. The day you stop educating yourself and believing you know everything is the day you fall behind. You've got to continue to educate yourself. Your education doesn't end when you finish college or when you get a doctorate.

Your education is daily, each and every day. For example, I've learned something by being here with you today. I assume you've learned something by being here.

Lifelong learning is very important. You go to college and get your degree to get a piece of paper that allows you into the workforce. However, your learning and your education is only beginning when that happens.

Greg Demetriou: My brother who was very dear to me, we worked together for a while and I always thought I was lucky as I moved along and one day we're driving to work together and he's laughing at me because I said that and he said haven't you not yet realized that you had to put yourself in a position by being good so that you could get lucky.

Michael Dowling: Luck is a big part of it and also not being risk adverse. I mean, you've got to be willing to fail. Failing and learning how to fail and learn from it is important. Some people will think leadership means, I'm always successful. However, if you don't learn how to fail you can't learn how to succeed. Success is built on the back of failure and you try things and if it doesn't work...it's like Einstein...I believe said, "I've never failed, I just figured out 500 ways that didn't work."

Show up every day. You tackle every day with the right commitment and you respect the people you work with. Work as a team player and you make people feel like they want to belong.

Greg Demetriou: Northwell started at very different beginnings, what happened to make it become the organization that it is today from such smaller beginnings. I believe it was only one hospital at the time and now it's many.

Michael Dowling: It started with Northshore University Hospital back in the early '90s and the leadership at Northshore, back then I was not here back then right at the very, very beginning, but Northshore began with this idea that if you brought hospitals together in the region it would be better for everybody and the community. This had been demonstrated in other parts of the country. Northshore began to add other hospitals and over the course of first couple of years they added about nine hospitals and then the big merger occurred that everybody talks about which was the merger between LIJ and Northshore. That was the eleventh merger and now we have 23 hospitals. We've got ambulatory sites and nursing schools, medical schools, and major research. Today we're the largest employer on Long Island and the biggest health system in New York State. Also, of the biggest in the country and we're continuing to grow. Our base, of course, has been from the very beginning Long Island. It started in Nassau County and it is where our headquarters remains. As a result of what Northshore did over the years, all of the other systems in the New York area followed. They followed what Northshore had started which is now Northwell.

Greg Demetriou: Mr. Dowling, how important is the business community in terms of its skillsets, its vibrancy? Long Island's a unique place to live in. How much do you think that played into the growth of Northwell?

Michael Dowling: First of all, Long Island is a great place to live. I've been living on Long Island now for 21 years. It's a great, great place. It has wonderful assets, wonderful research facilities,

wonderful hospitals, wonderful topography. It benefits also because it's close to Manhattan, it's close to New York City, but also Long Island as being the first suburb. Long Island made it possible for us to begin and to grow at the beginning. If we had been anywhere else in the New York area, I don't think it would have happened as quickly. I think Long Island has got wonderful attributes, it has an entrepreneurial spirit and if you're going to be successful these days you've got to be entrepreneurial. You've got to be creative. You've got to be very adaptable and I think Long Island has allowed those things to occur.

Greg Demetriou: There are so many developments coming out of your research arms now, how do you as the CEO foster that or oversee that, actually, because it's such a high-level of technology and research that's going on.

Michael Dowling: We're at the cutting edge of major, major research here at part of our organization that's known as the Feinstein Institute for medical research. We're at the cutting edge internationally in the area called bio-electronic medicine, which is the use of devices that could be implanted in the body that helps modify the immune system, so that you use less medications.

We have had numerous, numerous new developments. We also have as an organization a very entrepreneurial spirit. We have a part of the organization called Venture. We've actually started quite a number of new companies and we invest in a lot of new companies. We are involved in joint ventures as well. We're more than a place that just runs hospitals and ambulatory sites. We're in the education field, in the research field, in the exploratory field and in the discovery field.

Greg Demetriou: Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the level of what's coming up to you that needs your attention?

Michael Dowling: No because, If you're not swamped with new ideas all the time, then you're not terribly busy. I believe that if you're not to some extent stressed out, you're not doing much. You are basically sitting back being catatonic. If my days quiet and easy, it means we're not doing anything. If you're in a leadership capacity anywhere, stress is not bad. It generates innovation. I say this, and some people get a little confused when I say it. To be successful, you've got to be a little bit unhappy and always searching to do better than you did yesterday. When you sit back and say I'm relaxed, I'm comfortable, everything is perfect, that's when the decline starts.

It's like if you play sports, which I did. The only way we become good is to push ourselves to the limit. There's a big gap between our capabilities and what it is we're currently doing. No matter how good we think we are there is a big gap that we have to close. You've got to be closing that gap and the competition has to be self-competition. You've got to look at yourself in the mirror and say yeah, I did well today, but I should have done better. That's what makes you grow and develop and at the end of the day be successful long term.