



WRITTEN BY ROBERT PORTER



*Robert (Bob) Porter is an accomplished leader with over 30 years' in health system leadership. He's worked with diverse groups of stakeholders in healthcare, led the development of a 'hospital of the future,' and oversaw an ACO integrated platform design. A frequent speaker and author on a variety of leadership topics, he is influential in the movement toward population health management. He holds an MBA and JD from Stanford University. His proudest achievement is having the status of "lay affiliate" bestowed on him by the Daughters of Charity in recognition of his work in Catholic healthcare and in the broader social ministry of that Vincentian order. Bob is accredited in coaching by the prestigious Hudson Institute of Coaching.*

## Re-imagining Healthcare: *Leading Beyond the Pandemic*

*The response of the healthcare community to the COVID-19 pandemic has been nothing short of heroic. Across the globe, individuals and organizations have set aside their self-interest and responded to this unprecedented threat with little regard for the risks they are taking. We owe them our deepest gratitude.*

As the industry moves beyond a focus on the immediate response to the pandemic, leaders have begun to contemplate the enormous operational and financial damage that has occurred in just a few months and turned their thoughts to the future. While there is some variability on the extent, it seems fair to say that material damage has been done to the financial position of virtually every healthcare provider in our country. In response, it will be necessary to take drastic steps to restore operational and financial stability. There is no option to go back to what was before. The question is how organizations and leaders will choose to go forward.

In simple terms, there appear to be two very different choices for the path forward. One is the traditional "turnaround" approach in which the existing chassis of our healthcare system remains intact and the focus is on removing cost through dramatic expense cuts in personnel and other expenses. What makes this approach attractive is that the changes can be implemented quickly and are entirely within the control of leaders of those organizations. It relies on the assumption that there is extensive waste in the current structure that can be identified and eliminated. While there is likely some remaining waste in the current structure, it seems unlikely that it will be sufficient to meet the

magnitude of the current financial challenge without material damage to quality, safety, and the experience for patients, staff and physicians.

The second path forward is to re-imagine our healthcare system, challenging conventional thinking and existing operating systems to achieve breakthrough improvement through fundamental redesign. Other industries have accomplished transformation using this “design thinking” approach. It is an approach built on hope rooted in reality, on faith in abundance, on unleashing the infinite creativity and will of the human spirit. It demands leadership of a different kind, focused less on what is than on what is possible. Courageous leadership willing to let go of the known to venture into the realm of the possible. Collaborative leadership willing to build and leverage new relationships to co-create the future. Creative leadership that builds a fertile culture for curiosity, experimentation, and imagination.

For many reasons, healthcare has had less success achieving breakthrough improvement than other industries despite widespread consensus about the waste imbedded in the current healthcare financing and delivery system. The limited progress is not entirely surprising. Absent the compulsion to make radical change, humans tend to cling to the comfort of the known even when it is not wholly satisfactory. What this pandemic has done is provide the compulsion to

## What this pandemic has done is provide the compulsion to explore radical change.

explore radical change. Healthcare organizations have been propelled into a future from which there is no going back. And while that is unsettling it is also exciting for leaders who can embrace the opportunity that lies ahead.

MEDI Leadership has worked side-by-side with healthcare leaders for over 20 years and is poised to help them face the daunting challenge of leading beyond the pandemic. Through our work we have developed an emerging understanding of the leadership competencies required to lead forward to the next normal. The purpose of this document is to share those observations, frame a dialogue with the industry, and provide support for leaders to build the muscle needed to lead in a new and transformative way.

**A Mindset of Hope, Optimism, Possibility and Resilience:** While much of the design of the “next” normal will come from broad engagement, not top down direction, creating a culture capable of transformation starts at the top. Leaders are culture bearers whose actions, aligned with their words, set the tone for those they lead and with

whom they collaborate. Reimagining healthcare will require an unwavering belief that transformation is possible if we are willing to challenge perceived limitations and come together to transform our broken healthcare system. This is not pie-in-the-sky optimism detached from reality. It is optimism born of confidence from previous challenges successfully met and belief in the creative capacity of people working together.

As Diane Coutu captured in her landmark *Harvard Business Review* article, resilient leaders are able to accept and courageously face the realities facing them, holding on to the unwavering belief that they will prevail in the end. They are able to accept and find meaning in the challenges they endure and use them as a springboard for growth. And they are possessing a creative spirit, using asset-based thinking to envision and design innovative solutions from the resources available to them. They recognize and invest in the physical, emotional and spiritual endurance required to persist in driving forward.

While a culture of possibility begins with leaders, it must cascade throughout the enterprise and be apparent in the way in which the

# CONSIDERATIONS FOR RE-IMAGINING HEALTHCARE



organization does everything: budgeting, sourcing and recruitment, allocating capital, tracking performance, setting agendas, communicating, engaging with the community, etc. It is a culture that values learning and exploration and is willing to invest in resources to support it. It welcomes challenges to the status quo, never satisfied that good enough is good enough.

**Relentless Curiosity:** Leaders seeking to drive redesign are relentlessly curious and make personal and organizational investment in broadening and deepening their understanding of the world around them. They recognize that a portion of their time must be external facing, to anticipate and seek opportunities to exploit the changing landscape in the industry and beyond. They cultivate broad networks, spending time and energy not only outside the organization but outside the industry

to explore possibilities for integration of capabilities from other realms into their pursuit of breakthrough improvement. The most obvious example is harnessing the enormous potential of the technological and digital transformation taking place across the world. Transformational leaders see their job as more than driving exceptional performance from their existing business model. They see it as reimagining the business model itself to push performance beyond perceived limits.

**Compassion, Empathy, and Change Leadership:** Any change, no matter how small, is likely to encounter resistance from those affected by the change. It is a natural and physiological process. As humans, we are predisposed to hang onto the comfort of the known until there is something that compels us to embrace a new beginning.

Transformational leaders are empathetic which enables them to anticipate and work to mitigate the fears, concerns and obstacles that stand in the way of breakthrough change. They help others to let go of the known by building a shared understanding of the necessity of change and integrating their requirements into the design of the future state. They also provide support and encouragement through the awkward period in which people adapt to that new beginning.

The leader extends the scope of the process to encompass all those with a stake in the organization's mission including front line staff, physicians, governing boards, payors, suppliers, partners and, most of all, the patients and families being served. The more empathy and compassion a leader has, the more the leader invests in seeing the change through the stakeholders' eyes, the more the

## Transformational leaders, and the organizations they lead, have the capacity to constantly evolve and adapt.

change is designed in a manner sensitive to their needs, the greater the chance to overcome resistance and cultivate the ownership needed for sustained success.

### **Innovation, Design Thinking,**

**Leadership Agility:** The recent pandemic is but one example of how the world around us has become increasingly complex. The reality in which any organization operates is the product of numerous interconnected variables which interact in unpredictable and rapidly changing ways. Transformational leaders, and the organizations they lead, have the capacity to constantly evolve and adapt. They are comfortable with ambiguity and focus less on “knowing” than they do on continuous “learning.” They reach expansively to fight against the natural tendency to regress to conventional thinking. They have a tolerance for risk and look for opportunities to experiment and test prototypes. They are not afraid of failure and see it as nothing more than a step in the learning process.

They invest in feeding the creative process, first through the ongoing gathering and sharing of information to create a shared consciousness across the enterprise. Then, aligned

through a shared mission and overall strategic framework, they empower and equip team members across the organization to adapt and implement change at the pace required to stay ahead of the market. Traditional, top down, command and control is replaced with dispersed but aligned authority down and across the organization.

These leaders are also personally creative and invest in the organizational capacity and design thinking skills to nurture innovation. They recognize that breakthrough improvement requires more than responding to survey results and focus group feedback. They take steps to promote a deeper understanding of the ideal customer and staff experience through user centered observation and other design thinking tools. It is worth noting that during the pandemic, out of necessity, consumers have experienced new avenues of access to healthcare providers through e-visit and telemedicine. That experience may well influence their expectations in the post-pandemic world.

**Connecting and Teaming:** Often the opportunity for breakthrough improvement is found in creative

new relationships built around recognition of shared purpose. In response to the pandemic, there have been numerous examples of people and organizations working together in new and innovative ways. Providers, public health authorities, health plans, governmental leaders and social service agencies have come together fashioning bold solutions made necessary by the impact and urgency of the crisis. Longstanding barriers to change have been removed and changes once seen as too risky or disruptive have been implemented with many of them proving to be highly effective.

As the industry moves beyond the pandemic, transformational leaders have the opportunity to extend, expand and build upon those new relationships. To do so will require several essential leadership skills. First, seeing the possibilities that reside in relationships and building the connections and trusted relationships necessary to engage in their pursuit. Second, evolving those engaged in the collaborative pursuit from a gathering of individuals seeking to advance their self-interest to a true team galvanized around their shared purpose. And, finally, learning how to lead in a relationship in which authority is shared. This requires letting go of the traditional model of authority based on hierarchical, positional power and replacing it with referent power built on mutual interest and mutual respect. Transformational leaders recognize that power is not a finite concept where giving more power to

one means diminishing the power of others. They build relationships in which each party has the power needed to design solutions that advance the shared goal in a manner that respects the legitimate needs of one another.

### **Collaboration and Integrative**

**Thinking:** Leveraging the collective strength in collaborative relationships requires more than good intentions. Transformational leaders are skillful in building integrative solutions. They engage others in the process and listen deeply to understand the underlying needs and requirements of each party to the solution. They embrace different points of view as enriching the dialogue, not a conflict to be won or lost. They seek to understand the underlying differences in experience,

data or assumptions that lead to different conclusions, and do their best to find ways to close the gap. They use their creative gifts to search for dovetailing solutions which address the requirements of those engaged in its pursuit. And they define the metrics of success so that they can gather and use data to help them make necessary adjustments to their decisions as time passes and more is learned.

### **Exceptional Communication Skills:**

Skillful communication is an essential ingredient for transformational leadership in a number of critical ways. Perhaps most critical is the ability to articulate a compelling vision of the future with the passion needed to inspire and align others in its pursuit. It is inevitable that there

will be uncertainty around the details of the vision. When it is not possible to share specific information, transformational leaders communicate and build trust in the process and the values that will guide the development of the future state.

Transformational leaders also build communication processes and systems to gather and distribute information to promote the real-time, shared understanding needed to design effective solutions. This “shared consciousness” is an essential ingredient of collaborative, distributed decision-making. And they listen deeply to empathically understand the fears and concerns that stand in the way of stakeholders letting go of the known so those fears can be thoughtfully addressed as the path forward is designed together.

## Parting Thoughts

The road ahead for healthcare will be full of daunting challenges that will demand the very best of those leading the journey. For those willing to embrace the challenge, there lies opportunity to reimagine, fundamentally, the future direction of the industry. It will require courage and extraordinary skill to navigate this journey successfully. But with a mindset focused on possibility and a skill set built to drive transformation, we can do more than recover what was. We can build something even better. The patients and communities we serve are counting on us to do just that.

### **About MEDI Leadership**

Transformational healthcare cannot happen without transformational leadership. A focused collaboration between executives, physicians, and other clinical leaders is required to thrive in today’s healthcare environment. MEDI Leadership is the catalyst for accelerating the development of exceptional leaders, teams, and results. We empower executive and clinical leaders to drive meaningful transformation and improve performance throughout the organization. MEDI Leadership was founded in 2000 and is the largest executive coaching firm dedicated exclusively to healthcare. Our coaches bring a blend of extensive healthcare experience and leadership coaching.

Accelerate your impact. Become a MEDI-coached leader.