



Leading with Two Ears and One Mouth

The best leaders know when to stop and listen.

By Karen Bowling

After 20 years as a prominent health system marketing executive, Karen Bowling in 2001 co-founded Solantic LLC, the nation's fourth largest urgent care company. Its 33 centers are found in communities as well as in places like airports and Walmart. Bowling's marketing acumen is apparent. Applying retail concepts, Solantic was among the first to post prices on menu boards, provide online registration, display waiting times and supply beepers for those wishing to leave while waiting for care. It also offers a three-day "feel better" guarantee stating that, if you don't feel better, you can return for free treatment. And it incentivizes employees based on customer satisfaction. In the first of chief executive columns, *Marketing Health Services* asked Solantic's CEO to share her secrets to success and what keeps her up at night.

With the uncertain impact of health care reform, challenging economic times and more pressure for better value from our customers, being a leader today is not only exciting—it can be overwhelming. I am continually working to understand how to become a better leader and best position the company for continued growth.

I am fortunate that "who I am" connects with "what I do." I am passionate about our mission to provide convenient care at a fair price with as little hassle as possible. How can this enthusiasm be transformed for the organization to the employees who deliver the product and the customers who receive it?

Know thyself. I believe at least some part of leadership is rooted in the characteristics of the CEO. It is important to reflect and understand my own tendencies, which I have done through behavioral assessments and working with a corporate coach. The entire management team has also been through this process, and we continue to work with a coach to become a more effective team.

From the beginning of our company's history we identified the "win" for those stakeholders that would be critical to our success. Why would an employee want to work here? Why would a payor want to contract with us? Why would a patient choose to access our services?

What makes a good leader? To be an effective leader in understanding, anticipating and exceeding our customers' expectations, we have to listen to them. To be able to recruit, retain and develop our teams, we have to listen to them. The measurement systems we use to collect that feedback is a critical piece of our planning.

While leadership is a very broad topic, here are some of the things that I think about and the challenges that keep me up at night:

- Determining how to create more value for our customers

- Keeping our costs down so we can offer the best price
- Maintaining the right balance between chasing the newest and most exciting opportunity and making sure everything we already have works
- Growing at the right pace, and being flexible to adapt
- Finding people who do the job because they want to
- Making sure employees **know** how they are doing at their jobs, and reinforcing positive behaviors
- Staying the course, but also being flexible enough to adapt
- Understanding that, while I may be worried about growing the company, other employees may be worried about the economy and job security
- Constantly communicating the mission statement
- Staying close enough to the business to know if we are on track without micro-managing
- Borrowing ideas, but making them our own
- Keeping a tendency to take on too much in check
- Being visible to employees and patients regardless of other pressing priorities
- Becoming a better listener

I don't think there is any better leadership training than being in a leadership role. To get through the tough times, I believe it helps if you are passionate about what you do and are committed to the organization's mission. Good leaders also are self-aware, willing to seek feedback and able to communicate with customers and employees. **MHS**

About the Author

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