

Deborah Bowen

Deborah Bowen's purposeful leadership sets the tone for ACHE members



American College of
Healthcare Executives
for leaders who care®

Deborah Bowen, president and CEO of the American College of Healthcare Executives, is leading with purpose.

The most recent evidence is the coveted Baldrige Gold Award for the state of Illinois that ACHE recently earned, one of only 12 such organizations to be named out of 270 applicants. ACHE now moves on to consideration for the national award, which recognizes performance excellence.

"Having ways to improve our organization in a more systematic way is important to me," says Bowen. "But let's be clear – the members own the organization. The board and I have the privilege of serving our members in ways that advance the field."

For more than 40,000 members that ACHE represents, having a clearly delineated plan is important. Bowen and the board recently expanded on that with strategic initiatives that focus on "leading

for diversity, leading for safety, and leading for value," Bowen says.

- **On diversity and inclusion:** "I'd love to see a more diverse leadership community in the future because we know our leadership ranks in management and in our boardrooms don't look like the populations we're serving."
- **On safety:** "If we could eradicate preventable harm, that would be tremendous." ACHE is, in fact, partnering with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement/ National Patient Safety Foundation Lucian Leape Institute (IHI/ NPSF LLI) on a practical playbook for executives to enable cultures of safety, which is key to reducing errors within their health organizations.
- **On value:** "Regardless of what happens with the ACA/AHCA, we're going to be in a value-driven climate. It's going to be about

cost and quality and the core of what leaders do."

Having a purposeful approach to one's career also is part of the ACHE banner, and Bowen exemplified that when she returned to ACHE as the chief operating officer from a different industry and looked at what she would need to do if she wanted to be considered as a successor to renowned industry leader Tom Dolan, ACHE's CEO at the time.

"I hired a coach about two years before Tom retired," Bowen recalls. "I did a qualitative 360 assessment where I had former board members, former ACHE chairs and a few staff members do interviews with the coach and then tell me a little about what they saw in my strengths and areas for development."

That not only showed initiative, but courage and transparency.

"I believe information is power," she says. "If I know something, I

can do something about it. If I don't, then I'm vulnerable and I don't have the ability to know what I need to be working on. Self-awareness is very, very important."

But Bowen didn't stop there.

"I knew that, as COO, I already had the operational experience," she says. "But if I wanted to be a candidate for the position of president and CEO, I knew I would need to get more credibility and experience in the external skills. So,

I started sitting on a few boards, and I signed myself up for more public speaking where I would be pushed to do more things and provide more insights about the industry."

In strategic terms, Bowen took more risks in her leadership. That, in turn, encouraged her to take more risks. And achieve more success. "Taking risks," she says now, "gave me strength and experience and insight."

But from her vantage point,

Bowen sees that ACHE members need to do more to become the leaders that the industry needs.

"We're in the career planning business," she says. "We've done surveys on this very topic, and only 28 percent of executives have a career plan. People need to devote as much time and seriousness to their own careers as they do to everything else in their worlds."

Now that she is leading ACHE, Bowen says she is more aware than

Lessons from the big city

Deborah Bowen grew up in Park Ridge, an affluent, middle-class Chicago suburb. However, she became aware of disparities at a young age – through their church, Bowen's mom gave piano lessons to African-Americans who lived in an economically challenged section of Chicago. When some students would occasionally visit the Bowen home for lessons, some people in the neighborhood didn't take kindly to it. That disappointed and angered Bowen, and gave her an early determination to make a positive impact in the world.

As the first member of her family to attend graduate school – and one with a lineage that included many entrepreneurs – the future was full of wide-open vistas and possibilities. Like many young people, she was unsure what field to go into. She considered teaching French. She also took acting

lessons in Chicago, which set the scene for self-discovery.

"I came downtown for the lessons, during which I found out I was a lousy actress," she says with a laugh. "But I also saw a lot of homeless people in the city, and I became painfully aware of the need and opportunities to help others."

So, Bowen decided on psychology as her major. She earned a graduate degree in social work and started to work with heroin addicts one on one. Eventually, through employment at the Wisconsin Medical Society, she saw she could help more people if she was able to influence public policy and the systems that support people. That began a career that has led her to the helm of ACHE.

"It's that ripple effect that John F. Kennedy talked about," she says. "If you find the right stone, you can make large ripples."

ever of the power of her words – so she tries to use them sparingly.

“One of our former chairmen, retired Major General David Rubenstein, used to write the initials ‘LWLW’ on the back of his name tent before every Board meeting, and I never understood what it meant. So, I asked him,” she says.

“He said, ‘When you’re the general, people look to you for their cues, so the initials reminded me to, ‘Listen. Wait. Listen. Wait.’ If I wait, someone will break the silence and talk; then, I am in a better position to listen. But if I’m

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the first to talk, then I’m doing all the talking and directing them to my answer.’”

Rubenstein’s story has stuck with Bowen.

“I think that’s very powerful,” she says, “because if you’re talking all the time, you’re not listening; and if you’re not

listening, you’re not learning.”

Listening is especially important in healthcare, a profession that’s about compassion and assistance, Bowen adds.

“I really do believe that health-care leaders are special that way. They have the heart and soul to make a difference in the field.” **MPI**