

Podcast Transcript – Straight Talk with Mary Ackenhusen - March 2015

*The following is an excerpt from a live presentation at the VCH True North Forum on January 30, 2015 at Lions Gate Hospital. For the complete podcast go to the [Up For Discussion blog](#) and click on the Podcast button. Or search for “VCH News Radio” in iTunes.*

MARY: I want to talk to you about the new leadership competencies, which I'm very excited about. The competencies we're going to talk about are really one piece of a number of things we're trying to do to make our culture even stronger and more united. One of the things I've talked about in a recent podcast is how we shift the culture and how we get this highly engaged team of people at all levels of the organization. But it's long term. It isn't going to happen in twelve months but I think we will start to see some results in twelve months and two years. And so a lot of what I do is to set that tone.

A lot of what my team does is to set that tone. And you guys do it too. Every day in what you do, you set the tone for the culture. So at the senior executive team level we started talking about how do we get the right people in the organization or how do we reinforce the right behavior in the organization that we're looking for, that sets that tone. And what really is that, that we're trying to achieve. That led us to talk about the competencies of ourselves as leaders and as all individuals throughout the organization. And we talked about it in the context that we have a huge challenge in front of us, and the only way we're going to be successful in the challenge is if we have really above average people, people who are really willing to put themselves out there. Really pushing the envelope every day in an appropriate way.

And we said: what are the competencies that differentiate those people from people that are really good, because we've got lots of really good people, but what are the ones that are really above average and how would we know them. How do we interview for them. How do we develop people for those things. What would those competencies be. When we usually talk about competencies we talk about the general things that we all know. You have to have good communication skills. You have to be transparent. You have to be a good critical thinker. So those are a given. All of us need to have those skills. But what is the extra spark that you need to really push that envelope and to be a leader developing the culture within VCH. So that's what I'm going to talk about today.

So we really put it into four different categories and we have two competencies in each one. We could have had a zillion competencies. We went through a workshop trying to take it from thirty or so down to these select eight. And we relied a lot on what other industries are doing, and other companies. In particular Netflix has some really great competencies that really hit the mark, at least in my mind. So we looked at that too and incorporated some of that. First and foremost we expect respect, and there's lots of ways to think about respect. Performance excellence. We want to be a learning organization and we want to have the courage to innovate. So when we say respect, there are two competencies that we put in that category: 'You question actions inconsistent with our values.' That's really important to me. And that's a hard thing to do. That takes courage. So let me give an example of a very courageous way you might do that. When you see somebody being disrespected, somebody being bullied, do you step in there? Do you say something? That, that's not acceptable? Or do you sit there and watch? I know a lot

of us, and I'm in that category, have often sat there and watched. Felt terribly bad for that individual, but didn't always step in and say 'uh-uh.' So that's the kind of thing. You question those actions that are not consistent with our values.

You treat people with fairness and respect, independent of their status, independent of if they agree with you. Meaning, even those folks that every time they open their mouth you go 'oh my gosh there they go again.' There's some truth to what they say. There's probably some good value. But we just need to be open to that. So respecting them regardless. Because the best ideas come from everywhere. We need to hear all those ideas. So to live this competency we need to be genuinely curious about how other people think. We have to think about how we put ourselves in their shoes. And so when somebody you know constantly complains, don't ignore them and say there they go again, just think about what they're saying.

In the next category: performance excellence, we have two competencies and we say: 'You hire great people and you expect great things from them.' It's hard to hire great people. Sometimes it gets pretty desperate. We're like 'I really need somebody to fill this vacancy.' But don't settle. Because once they're in that vacancy you don't have that opportunity anymore to get that great person. You're going to be with this 'ok' person for a long time. So don't settle. Another competency under performance excellence: 'You inspire others with your thirst for excellence.' So that's really modeling the behaviour. You thirst for excellence. You want the people who work for you to thirst for excellence. You want your peers to model that behaviour. Then we go on to being a learning organization.

The first competency there is: 'You create an environment where people can flourish and grow.' So that's why we want people to work for VCH as opposed to any other health authority. We know we can't pay them any differently. The cost of living in Vancouver Coastal is probably higher than most of the other health authorities. But we can give them that great environment where they can flourish and grow. And we know that's more important often times, than the wages.

Secondly: 'You seek what's best for the health system rather than what's best for yourself and the group.' So you see the big system. And sometimes you'll make decisions that aren't always the best for you as an individual or your department. If you ever interview to be on the senior team, I guarantee that question will be on your interview panel. Because we use it all the time now, just to see how people are able to think more broadly.

And then the last area: 'Courage to innovate.' So we say the competency is: 'You challenge the status quo to improve quality and sustainability.' We do this every day. Most of you do this every day. It's what we do. And we want to continue encouraging that and hiring people and developing people to do that as just a way of managing. And secondly: 'You take smart risks and you make tough decisions without agonizing.' So that's the other side of courage and confidence.

So these are the competencies that we think, as the senior team, really differentiate. And if we can have leaders that exhibit these competencies or are aspiring to these competencies, we're going to make tremendous progress towards the challenge that we have in health care in terms of maintaining sustainable health care at a high quality level. And that's what we're asking from each of you.

So what does it mean exactly? It means that we need to support each other to exhibit these competencies. Yes your boss will help you to understand where they think you need to be stronger but a lot of this is really helping each other. Another question you might get in an interview if you interview with me: how have you addressed—when have you seen a peer who did not live our values? What did you do about that? How did you address that? That goes to not just standing by but taking some action.

I'll give you an example that I had that kind of touches on some of these. Back when I was a young COO, a younger person anyway, a young COO here at Coastal. That was back in about 2007, 2008, something like that and one of our biggest issues was the congestion in the emergency room. It was extremely, extremely bad to the point that there were one or two heart attacks in the waiting room, you know, which is totally unacceptable. And as I started to get more into this, it took me longer than it should have. I'm quite embarrassed actually. It probably took me six months before I realized that one of our issues here at Lions Gate was that we didn't have enough staff to open all our beds, even the ones we were funded for. I think we had about eighteen to twenty beds closed. So of course we were congested. We didn't have the beds to keep the flow going.

So when we looked at that, it was because we were so short of nurses. It had been going on for a while. So we had what seemed to be a serious safety issue and people were potentially having compromised outcomes in the emergency room pretty clearly. And no nurses. Talked to Anne. Anne was totally on board 'we're going to get you some nurses as fast as we can, but you know it's not going to be overnight.' So we started talking about agency nurses. I asked 'can we do it with agency nurses?' We can't let this go on. We know what's happening now. We can't let it go on. And we could have agency nurses. Can we get them two weeks, three weeks. You know how COOs are. They want everything to happen overnight. They said 'oh Mary no no, we don't do that at Lions Gate. It's a really bad thing to do. You'll have all the nurses turned against you. You're just new here. You have to make a reputation in a positive way. Bringing in agency nurses is not going to do anything for you. It's going to be quite—they're going to be very resistant etc., etc. Professional Practice wasn't too thrilled either.

But I pushed it because it was the right thing to do. It aligned with our values of safety first and foremost. Safety before me and my reputation as a COO. Safety before the nurses' concerns. It was safety for the patient. Patients first. So we pushed it. But we did it in a smart way, or what I thought was a smart way. So we first and foremost offered as much overtime as you want to any of the nurses who were on staff. We also offered them an opportunity for training hours. If they came on they would not only get the overtime, but they'd also get some training hours. And you know how much response we got? Like zero. So then we went and hired the agency nurses. Professional practice worked with us to make sure they were well trained etc., etc. So it was a very unpopular thing to do—one of the things you shouldn't do. But it was the right thing to do because it was safety first. And we did it in a smart way and took that risk. So that's my example.

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