Leadership with conscience, compassion, and commitment

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I would like to thank the Northeastern University School of Pharmacy for the honor of being named the 2003 John W. Webb Visiting Professor. Before I prepared this lecture, never had I consecutively read the Harvey A. K. Whitney or John W. Webb speeches. Never before had I read Bill Zellmer’s essays organized by topic. Never before had I read three books in one weekend. Our busy worlds do not generally permit this kind of concentrated learning and reflection without a specific goal. The assignment of preparing for this lecture has been very fulfilling, a gift in itself for which I am sincerely grateful.

All this reading of the theories, values, visions, strategies, and goals of many thought leaders in pharmacy and the corporate world has enabled me to reflect on leadership in general, but particularly within our profession. Those of you who know me probably expected me to discuss management strategies in a complex, matrixed, academic medical center or, perhaps, “managing up.” I have chosen a different, more basic topic for this speech, in part, because of the things I have read by and about John W. Webb and because I feel this topic is critical to the survival of pharmacy as a profession.

Our complex world of pharmacy presents many challenges, including staff shortages, cost containment, downsizing, drug counterfeiting, and technology. To successfully tackle and endure these challenges, we must first start with ourselves and ensure that we have the foundation of character necessary to face the challenges we encounter in our quest to help people make the best use of medicines: conscience, compassion, and commitment.

These characteristics form a critical basis for the work we must do as leaders: create sound missions and goals, develop strategies to accomplish our goals, manage human resources, appropriately allocate scarce resources, communicate effectively, and numerous other tasks. They are also an important foundation for every member of our profession as we perform our daily tasks. Accordingly, it is our responsibility as leaders to inspire others to develop and exhibit these characteristics in their daily work.

Defining conscience, compassion, and commitment

For clarification purposes, let me first define conscience, compassion, and commitment in the context of this lecture.

Conscience. Webster’s New World Dictionary defines conscience as “knowledge or sense of right and wrong, with an urge to do right.”

Conscience implies a subconscious yet thoughtful process. We have the ability to think through our actions and their consequences and make moral judgments. Equally important, we want to do the right thing. Our conscience helps to define our values.

Compassion. Compassion indicates that we care deeply about others, particularly those who are suffering or in trouble. As with conscience, the words “with an urge to” are used in the definition of compassion.

Compassion is embodied in these words spoken by Mother Teresa: “There are no great acts; only small acts, done with great love.” Compassion can be directed to people collectively and to individuals.

Commitment. According to Webster’s, commitment is “a pledge or
promise to do something or a dedication to a long term course of action.”¹ Commitment is often fueled by a strong desire or passion. I like to think of commitment as the result of putting conscience or compassion into action.

**Acquiring conscience, compassion, and commitment**

There are several schools of thought on whether characteristics such as conscience, compassion, and commitment are inherent or learned traits. Some feel that these qualities occur naturally, that individuals either are born with them or develop them at an early age. Others believe that these characteristics can be learned over time. Still others feel that these traits are acquired through a combination of inherent traits and learned behaviors.²

**Importance of conscience, compassion, and commitment**

Let me explore why I believe conscience, compassion, and commitment are important. I studied my job description, and nowhere did I find the words conscience, compassion, and commitment. Nor are they mentioned in the job descriptions of my staff. But I think they are critical to our profession, our organizations, our patients, and us as individuals.

**Professionally.** To understand why these characteristics are important to our profession, let us review the essence of what defines a profession. After reading Hepler,³ Zellmer,⁴,⁵ and numerous Whitney and Webb lectures,⁶,⁹ my assessment is that several essential components characterize a profession. First, there must be a societal need for the service provided by the profession. Second, a profession must possess a specialized body of knowledge, which it imparts to its members. The profession has a responsibility to continually challenge and update this knowledge through research and ensure that members are constantly acquiring new knowledge. Professions generally have a body of literature to support the ongoing acquisition of knowledge by its members. Third, each profession generally has its own governing or regulatory body that regulates the profession and ensures that members meet minimum qualifications. Finally, and I believe most importantly, in response to the privilege of being recognized by society as a profession, the profession is expected to use this knowledge ethically in its responsibility to serve society.

With the migration to the entry-level Pharm.D. program, expansion of residency programs, development of practice standards, development of continuing-education programs, and immediate access to new information through electronic media, we have made significant progress in enhancing our knowledge. Although it is essential that we continually assess and improve our knowledge base individually and collectively, we should not allow this focus to cause us to lose sight of our responsibility to serve others. Polls show that pharmacists are highly trusted by the public.¹⁰ I believe we have earned this honor because we have served with conscience, compassion, and commitment.

I recently met with a legislative aide in an attempt to ensure my senator would support legislation to enable compensation for the provision of medication therapy management services rendered by pharmacists. The aide countered that he had never received counseling from a pharmacist. He was never even asked if he wanted counseling when he visited a pharmacy. He had only been asked to sign a waiver. “Why should we pay pharmacists for services they do not provide?” he asked. My sentiments are reflected in Zellmer’s¹¹ statement “pharmacy practice will not be a complete profession until all of its practitioners are driven by a deep and abiding desire to help people make the best use of medications.”

**Organizationally.** What can conscience, compassion, and commitment mean for our organizations? In his book Authentic Leadership, Bill George² wrote,

> Over the last several decades, businesses have evolved from maximizing the physical output of their workers to engaging the minds of their employees. To excel in the twenty-first century, great companies will go one step further by engaging the hearts of their employees through a sense of purpose. When employees believe their work has a deeper purpose, their results will vastly exceed those who use only their minds and their bodies.

Maxwell¹² noted that, according to the Ethics Resource Center in Washington, D.C., companies that are committed to doing the right thing, have a written commitment to social responsibility, and act on it consistently are more profitable than those that do not. Goleman et al.¹⁴ indicated in Primal Leadership that how people feel about working in a company can account for 20–30% of business performance. A survey of hospital chief executive officers (CEOs) revealed that the interpersonal characteristics the CEOs valued most in pharmacy executives were the ability to develop relationships that elicit cooperation, teamwork and compliance, and high ethical standards.¹⁵

I have often reflected on a time when my staff was operating with almost impeccable conscience, compassion, and commitment. We were planning for and executing a move to a new building. We were focused on patient safety, intent that our services would remain intact, and determined to ensure that the continuity of care would not be interrupted because of the move. These moments were filled with focus, energy, and concern for fellow workers and patients. The long hours and challeng-
ing circumstances could have been stressful. Instead, there was the hum and high that I wish I could foster every day. I sensed a similar feeling when I was part of a group of pharmacists that the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists had asked to lobby for the support of reimbursement for medication therapy management services. And on September 11, 2001, the conscience, compassion, and commitment of our hospital staff were the most remarkable I have ever witnessed.

There are many challenges to fostering conscience, compassion, and commitment in our work environments. Ethical dilemmas abound. Many patients are noncompliant with their drug regimens because they cannot afford medications. There is a lag between the time when a new, expensive drug enters the market and when Medicare will reimburse for the cost of that drug. Conflicts between researchers and drug companies may put funding and publication of scientific research at risk. Fear of litigation challenges the prudent use of resources. Fear of retribution compromises the reporting of medication errors or near misses that are so important in helping us understand weaknesses in our systems so that we can prevent future errors. Compassion can be challenged by cultural barriers, communication via electronic media, and increased workloads. Commitment is difficult to achieve in the midst of downsizing and complex lifestyles. In addition, our younger work force has grown up in a culture where the rate of divorce has increased. They have watched their dedicated, hard-working parents sacrifice time with their family and other passions because of long hours at work, only to be the victims of layoffs. They have seen changes in our society that reflect a decline in a long-term commitment to others.

**Patients.** Patients need our conscience, compassion, and commitment collectively on issues and individually when we serve them. They count on us to ensure that their medications are appropriate, safe, and reasonably priced. They expect us to look at their medication therapy within the context of all their health issues and lifestyle challenges. They want us to contribute to their health as well as help them when they are sick. They especially need our conscience, compassion, and commitment when language or cultural barriers exist. They need our conscience, compassion, and commitment when access to care is limited because they are underinsured or uninsured.

**Individually.** The thesis developed by Klein and Izzo in Awakening Corporate Soul begins to explain how leadership and working with conscience, compassion, and commitment are relevant to individuals. They write,

> There is, at this time, both a crisis and a longing that permeates organizations across North America. We call one the commitment crisis, the struggle of organizations and their leaders to discover ways to ignite commitment and performance in a rapidly changing insecure climate. The other is an awakening that is slowly occurring within traditional businesses—the awakening of the Corporate Soul. It is a nascent movement that seeks to reclaim the spiritual impulse that is at the heart of work. It is about people wanting to have meaning and even more, to engage more of them at the deepest levels of their capacity and desire.

Klein and Izzo define soul as the “basic life energy that underlies and animates all human activity.” They believe “work itself is spiritual food. The soul requires a sense of being in the world, of having a place and making a contribution.”

Bolman and Deal theorize that more and more people are working to recapture the essence of what soul and spirit can bring to the modern workplace. Life and livelihood ought not to be separated but to flow from the same source . . . both life and livelihood are about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contribution to the greater community.

Most employees spend more time at work than anywhere else. It is intuitive that they would have a greater sense of fulfillment if they found their work meaningful, if they were passionate about their work. A survey showed that 8 of 10 people would continue to work if they did not need the money. For many people, the meaning of work goes beyond financial compensation. Working provides a sense of service, a way to help ourselves and others grow, and allow us to perfect our skills. Many individuals feed their souls by continuing to work. Work is an important part of fulfilled living.

Although conscience, compassion, and commitment are important to our profession and places of work, these characteristics may be even more important to us as individuals as we seek to find purpose in our lives, to make work a meaningful and fulfilling part of our life. In Tuesdays with Morrie, Morrie sums it up pretty well:

> So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they’re busy doing things they think are important. This is because they’re chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.
As leaders, we need to help others find purpose and meaning in what they are doing within our organizations, and perhaps in serving others outside of our organizations.

**Developing conscience, compassion, and commitment**

Assuming we accept that the characteristics of conscience, compassion, and commitment are important, how can we promote these characteristics in our profession and our places of work?

As I mentioned earlier, these characteristics are either inherited or learned or a combination of both. Accordingly, we can select individuals with those characteristics, develop them in current staff members, or do both.

By the time an individual applies to pharmacy school, these characteristics should be evident. Accordingly, assessing the values and attitudes of applicants, along with their aptitude for assimilating knowledge, could be helpful in ensuring that members of our profession are likely to further develop these characteristics. Once students are selected for pharmacy school, value should be placed on the development of these characteristics and reflected in the teaching objectives of relevant courses and evaluation of students’ progress. Some medical schools are beginning to include in their evaluation of medical students an assessment of their ability to show compassion to patients. At a minimum, we must focus on the importance of these characteristics through our communication with students and by modeling these behaviors. Residency programs offer an excellent opportunity to model and reinforce these characteristics in our profession.

When we recruit pharmacists into our organizations, we should seek pharmacists who demonstrate conscience, compassion, and commitment, as well as knowledge. At my institution, we are refining tools to assess, during the interview process, whether the values and attitudes of applicants are a good match for our organization. As leaders, we must create organizations that value and nurture these traits.

In addition, we need to support and develop one another as leaders in our profession. Many friendships within our profession have provided the synergy needed to promote these characteristics and the maturation of our profession.

According to George in Authentic Leadership, for organizations to be successful in today’s environment,

I believe that this type of leadership is needed in all of our organizations—schools of pharmacy, professional organizations, and health systems. And I believe that we must all be leaders, in one way or another, at one time or another, in our journey to help people make the best use of medicines.

If we believe that helping individuals find fulfillment in their work will benefit both them and our organizations, how can we help them find that fulfillment? Klein and Izzo described four paths that they believe can lead to greater fulfillment in work: when an individual’s work is connected to his or her values or passion, when employees realize that their work contributes to a goal that they feel is worthy, when they are in the process of mastering a skill, and when their work connects to others in a meaningful way. These are elements we should consider when leading others to greater engagement within our organizations.

What are some specific actions or approaches leaders can follow to foster what can be a win–win journey of developing conscience, compassion, and commitment within our organizations? My list is influenced by many thought leaders in pharmacy, as well as individuals from the corporate world.

1. Define and communicate the organization’s mission and values. The mission and values are the foundation of an organization. Members must know what they stand for and where they are going. It is the responsibility of the leader to ensure that the mission is articulated clearly, frequently, and in ways that are inspiring to members. Values must be authentic. They must be reinforced by every member of the organization, reflected in decisions that are made, and woven into the daily operations of the organization. To ensure that they are authentic, input might be sought from members of the organization when they are developed. To be compelling, however, the final product must reflect the core values of the leader. Finally, leaders must help members understand and believe that their work is essential to the realization of the organization’s mission. Without a vision or mission, people will often do what is required and nothing more.

2. Lead by example. In Primal Leadership, Goleman et al. suggest that leaders who understand their values, goals and dreams know where they are headed and why. They are inspiring to others. Leaders must communicate the organization’s mission and embrace its values. They must demonstrate their commitment to the mission and values through their actions and decisions. When they fall short, they must admit their mistakes. If leaders want members to care about one another and those they serve, leaders must first show compassion to those they lead. If they...
have found fulfillment in their work, a way to connect their work with their values, they should share this discovery with others to inspire them to find meaning in their work. Finally, leaders should show their members that their life has balance, that they value and participate in life outside of the workplace. Simply stated, conscience, compassion, and commitment must start at the top and be clearly articulated and demonstrated.

3. Develop relationships. Leaders are sometimes so focused on strategy and processes that they lose track of the value of relationships. In order for members to be engaged in their organizations, they must trust their leaders. To develop that trust they must articulate and demonstrate. Leaders are key that the intentional actions to start at the top and be clearly articulated and demonstrated.

4. Build communities. Effective leaders value and work to build a sense of community in their workplace. Strong communities care about and support one another; they communicate effectively; they are honest; they coach and mentor one another; they share; they encourage one another; they are accountable to one another; they laugh and play together. Conversely, competition within the workplace can be counterproductive and should be managed carefully. Interdependence should be encouraged and rewarded. Communities with diversity in life experiences, talents, training, and culture have a greater range of thought and opinion, enabling them to approach situations with a more open, creative, and comprehensive perspective. Communities are especially powerful when there is a unified drive for excellence, and when they realize that their success is determined by the collective effort of everyone in the community. Conscience, compassion, and commitment are more likely to flourish when there is a strong sense of community.

5. Foster discovery and development of talent and skills. Some individuals find enjoyment in the details of work. They are engaged by the continual pursuit of perfecting work. They may give artistic detail to nonartistic tasks. Their work is a journey, not a series of destinations. I work with an individual who promotes clarity for her staff through the development of forms and schematics. She is continually perfecting and developing forms for new purposes and finding better ways to organize things. There is an art to her work, and I believe she finds enjoyment in her ongoing pursuit of improving her environment and helping her staff. Years ago I worked with a gentleman who fussed over the presentation of ointment he placed in jars. When a batch was complete, he would line up the jars on the counter with perfection and never leave until the area was completely clean, regardless of whether or not he had surpassed his working hours. There was an art to his work, and it was beautiful to observe. The challenge for leaders is to help individuals discover the tasks or work they enjoy and develop skills that will foster this engagement.

6. Provide opportunities to understand and appreciate the organization’s mission and values. When members more fully appreciate the value of their work, it is more compelling to support the mission and the values of the organization. Effective leaders provide opportunities for members to see and hear firsthand the value of their work. In corporate language, this is often expressed as amplifying the voice of the customer. For leaders in health systems, this might mean providing opportunities for employees to get closer to patients, participate in walk-in-their-shoes exercises, and hear sincere thanks from patients, doctors, nurses, administrators, or other relevant groups. Any exercises that enable us to see the significance of our daily work from a different and meaningful perspective will help employees, as well as leaders, better value the organization’s mission.

7. Celebrate and reward. It is important to reward and celebrate accomplishments. Immediate and small rewards, as well as recognition for sustained support of the mission and values, are important. Celebrations enable us to step back from our daily activities, reflect on where we came from, celebrate where we are, and inspire us to push forward.

8. Connect to hearts and souls. A passage in Authentic Leadership reads,

As a leader, you have the task of engaging the hearts of those you serve and aligning their interests with those of the organization you lead. Engaging the hearts of others requires a sense of purpose and an understanding of where you’re going. When you find that special alignment, you and your team will have the power to move mountains. Nothing will stand in your way.

Leaders who can help individuals connect their work to a greater purpose provide benefit to both the organization and the individual. Some individuals arrive at our organizations knowing their passions. We need to tap into their passions, engage their dreams, and help them find meaningful ways to attune their passions and dreams with our mission and their work. Others arrive without having identified a passion or a dream. With these employees, we must help them discover their dreams or kindle a fire that could lead them to their passions. We then need to help them channel that passion to their current work.
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When we know that our work contributes to something that is of value to others, there is greater commitment. If we align our work with a larger purpose, there is greater fulfillment. When we feel that our work is feeding our soul, our work is no longer a job. Instead, it becomes a precious part of living. Our role as leaders is to embark on this journey ourselves and help others with their own journeys.

In Ray’s6 Whitney lecture, this concept is idealistically tied to our profession when he reflects that “a professional practitioner serves a purpose greater than his or her own ambitions.” We may need to remind one another that our daily work can transcend to a greater purpose.

Applying conscience, compassion, and commitment

Assuming we have reached an ideal state in which all the members of our profession exude conscience, compassion, and commitment, what issues must we address? As leaders in health systems, we first and foremost hope that our patients and places of work will benefit. But if we apply our mission as pharmacists more broadly, there are many issues outside the narrow definition of pharmacy that affect our ability to fulfill our mission within our profession.

Drucker19 suggested that volunteerism outside the workplace adds to one’s social life, personal relationships, and feeling of contribution. Batstone20 described a study that found that individuals who participate in employer-sponsored community activities are 30% more likely to want to continue working for that company and help make it a success. Additional thought leaders, including Hansen,21 have suggested that volunteering outside of our places of work enhances the characteristics of conscience, compassion, and commitment that we want displayed within our profession. We should harness this energy in ways that will help people make better use of medicines.

Collins2 suggested that great leaders should lead with questions, not answers. Accordingly, I will take the leadership role and ask questions. What is your passion? What issues of conscience urge you to want to do what you feel is right? What issues cause you to want to help others? What issues stir up feelings of commitment? I will challenge you with some issues I believe need our conscience, compassion, and commitment:

- The shortage of pharmacists,
- Medication errors,
- The rush to implement computerized prescriber order-entry systems without careful evaluation,
- The lack of a standardized method for transferring accurate and complete patient health care information between health care providers and settings,
- Drug shortages,
- Counterfeit drugs in the supply chain,
- Importation and reimportation of drugs,
- Limited access to medication therapy management services, which are often tied to the receipt of a drug,
- The burden placed on health care organizations to control drug costs while the price of new drugs entering the market is skyrocketing,
- The growing number of uninsured and underinsured patients who cannot afford their medications,
- A lack of health care funding for preventive health services,
- Pharmacists and health systems that are not prepared or adequately trained in emergency preparedness and response,
- The potential for bias and incomplete data reporting in pharmaceutical industry-sponsored research,
- Consumers’ inundation with direct-to-consumer advertising of drug products, resulting in requests for inappropriate or unnecessary medications,
- Many Third-World countries’ limited access to basic drugs for treating diseases that we have eradicated or controlled, and
- The absence of pharmacists in many health care settings in Third-World countries.

This list is by no means complete. My list of concerns changes daily, and our answers and approaches to these issues may differ. The beauty of our individuality is that we will be passionate about different things, enabling more issues to receive attention. We will suggest different solutions, resulting in answers that are more creative and comprehensive. In struggling with these issues, we must keep the needs of those whom we serve as the guiding force for our decisions. Our greatest reward for working on these issues is that we have the opportunity to feed our souls individually as well as the soul of pharmacy.

With the challenges pharmacists face, we need, more than ever, individuals who practice our profession with conscience, compassion, and commitment. And we owe it to them to help make their time in our organizations meaningful—part of their passion in life, not simply a livelihood.

References