

# Customer Obsessed

**An Interview with Michael J. Dowling, President and Chief Executive Officer, Northwell Health**

**EDITORS' NOTE** Prior to assuming his current post in 2002, Michael Dowling was the health system's Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer. Before joining Northwell Health in 1995, he was a Senior Vice President at Empire Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Dowling also served in New York State government for 12 years, including seven years as State Director of Health, Education, and Human Services and Deputy Secretary to the governor and the final two years as Commissioner of the New York State Department of Social Services. Earlier, Dowling was a Professor of Social Policy and Assistant Dean at the Fordham University Graduate School of Social Services and Director of the Fordham campus in Westchester County. He has been honored with many awards and recognitions over the years, including being selected as the 2017 Grand Marshal of the New York City St. Patrick's Day Parade, the 2012 B'nai B'rith National Healthcare Award, the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, the 2011 Gail L. Warden Leadership Excellence Award from the National Center for Healthcare Leadership, the 2011 CEO Information Technology Award from Modern Healthcare magazine and the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society, the National Human Relations Award from the American Jewish Committee, the Distinguished Public Service Award from the State University of New York's Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, an Outstanding Public Service Award from the Mental Health Association of New York State, an Outstanding Public Service Award from the Mental Health Association of Nassau County, the Alfred E. Smith Award from the American Society for Public Administration, the Deming Cup from the Columbia School of Business and the Gold Medal from the American Irish Historical Society. For 13 consecutive years, Modern Healthcare has ranked Dowling on its annual list of the "100 Most Powerful People in Healthcare," including the #2 ranking in 2020. He was also ranked #44 among large company CEOs in the U.S. and was the nation's top-ranking healthcare/hospital CEO on Glassdoor's "Top CEOs in 2019" list. Dowling is past Chair of the Healthcare Institute and the current Chair of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI). He is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Sciences and the North



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American Board of the Smurfit School of Business at University College, Dublin, Ireland. He also serves as a board member of the Long Island Association. He is past chair and a current board member of the National Center for Healthcare Leadership (NCHL), the Greater New York Hospital Association (GNYHA), the Healthcare Association of New York State (HANYS) and the League of Voluntary Hospitals of New York. Dowling was an instructor at the Center for Continuing Professional Education at the Harvard School of Public Health. He earned his

undergraduate degree from University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, and his master's degree from Fordham University. He also has honorary doctorates from Queen's University Belfast, University College Dublin, Hofstra University, Dowling College and Fordham University.

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** Northwell Health ([northwell.edu](http://northwell.edu)) delivers world-class clinical care throughout the New York metropolitan area, pioneering research at the Feinstein Institutes for Medical Research, and a visionary approach to medical education, highlighted by the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell and Hofstra Northwell School of Graduate Nursing and Physician Assistant Studies. Northwell Health is the largest integrated health system in New York State with a total workforce of more than 76,000 employees – the state's largest private employer. With 23 hospitals, more than 830 outpatient

facilities, including 220 primary care practices, 52 urgent care centers, home care, rehabilitation and end-of-life care services, Northwell is one of the nation's largest health systems with \$14 billion in annual revenue.

**Will you discuss Northwell Health's long and deep commitment to diversity and inclusion?**

We have focused on this for decades because it is my view that if you want to be relevant and reflect the communities you serve and respond to their needs, there is no choice but to be diverse and inclusive in the way you operate and structure your organization. Northwell serves one of the most diverse regions in the world and we want to be responsive to our communities and have our workforce reflect these communities. In order to do this effectively, it has to be a central part of the organization's DNA and it starts with the onboarding of new staff from the front line caregivers to middle management to the senior leadership. This is also a moral issue and while we are making progress, we still have a long way to go. It is a never-ending process.

**How critical is it to provide opportunities for diverse talent to grow and lead in the organization in order to retain the talent?**

It is crucial that we identify diverse groups of people throughout the organization and provide them support, mentoring and education on an ongoing basis in order to continue to elevate

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them to senior positions. If you do not provide opportunities to grow and lead, it becomes a very hollow exercise. It has to be real. There is always unknown talent in your organization and you have to be aggressive in identifying it.

Diversity is also about sharing knowledge and getting different groups to understand each other better. If you are working alongside people from different parts of Asia or South America, it is important to know their background, history and culture. The more that diverse people work together and learn and understand each other, the more you can create understanding and build a team culture. We must all expand our knowledge base.

**What do you see as the impact that diversity and inclusion has on business performance?**

If you nurture the talent from different places and different backgrounds in your organization, it enhances the business enterprise. The more talent you have with different opinions and experiences that you bring together to make business decisions, the better those decisions will be for your business. At Northwell Health, we have what we call BERGs, which are Business Employee Resource Groups. We spend time with these groups, such as our African American BERG or our Asian BERG, in order to help us understand how we can be better in working and leading people with different backgrounds both in our organization and in our communities. We focus on issues such as literacy,

education, language, cultural uniqueness as well as supplier diversity by working with vendors that are diverse and represent these communities. Diversity and inclusion is a moral issue and it is also a critical business issue.

**Northwell Health has an innovative and leading medical school. Has the medical school been effective at attracting diverse students that will become the future leaders of the organization?**

This is a major focus of the medical school and we have attracted a diverse student population. It is a surprising statistic that there were more Black men in medical schools 20 years ago than there are today. This shocked me when I learned it. There is a documentary series titled, *Black Men in White Coats*, that we are engaged with and we know that we need to continue to increase the number of Black people in our student population and faculty in order to impact the numbers of Black doctors. When these individuals enter medical school, they need to see people that are like them in our faculty and in our hospitals in order to see opportunity and feel that they belong.

We also spend a great deal of time in the high schools and have a pipeline program for minority kids in underprivileged communities to try to get them interested in science. We need to build the pipeline over time so that these students will have the competencies to go into medical school and build a career in the profession.

**How is Northwell Health working to address the issue or health disparities which have been highlighted during the pandemic?**

This has been a focus for us for a long time and has been intensified with the pandemic. We have identified 11 communities that we are doing a lot of work with in regard to COVID testing and now with COVID vaccinations. We need to deal with the inequities in care that exist in these communities which have high instances of heart disease, diabetes and other illnesses. COVID shined a light on this problem and made it very clear that we need to do a better job in this area going forward. It will be an ongoing priority.

**Will you discuss your focus and emphasis on putting employees first?**

Inspired and happy employees have a direct correlation to happy customers. It is not complicated and applies to any business. If you run a restaurant and have a happy waitstaff that love working at the restaurant and enjoy working with each other, you feel it when you are a patron and it will result in you becoming a loyal customer. Satisfied employees mean satisfied customers and at Northwell we are both employee and customer focused. We were just ranked number 19 on *Fortune's* “100 Best Companies to Work For” list which says a lot about how we treat and care for our people, especially as we have been on the front lines of the pandemic this past year. In addition, our employee engagement scores have risen dramatically over the past twelve months even as our people were dealing with the stress and pressure of COVID. The key for us is to maintain this focus and commitment.

**Many leaders in the industry use the term patients, but you use the term customers. Will you elaborate on this distinction?**

I focus on the term customer since it is not only the patient, but the patient's family, that we are working with as well. When you look at it from the perspective of treating a patient, it puts that person in a subservient position where the provider knows everything and is dictating to the patient. This usually starts with the question, “What is the matter with you?” When you look at that person as a customer, the question becomes, “What matters to you?” It is about meeting the person where they are and focusing on service, convenience, quality and outcome. We need to be responsive to what the customer wants and needs. At Northwell, we are customer obsessed. ●

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