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My Turn

Mend it, don't end it

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It's been referred to as the "nuclear option," and it's something that Taos County Commissioners recently openly contemplated out of frustration with Holy Cross Hospital governance and management. It would have entailed terminating the hospital's lease of county real estate, and issuing a request for proposals for a substitute to operate our community hospital. The goal would be to secure a more accountable, transparent, and responsive replacement for an organization that had become a disappointment to many. Sounds reasonable enough, and given my history criticizing Holy Cross Hospital governance and management, one might think that I would be in favor of this. But, I am not.

Clearly, the relationship between Holy Cross Hospital and the community it serves, its sole reason for being, had become severely strained, perhaps perilously close to a breaking point. Having practiced psychology for decades, I've had a front row seat, dealing with frayed relationships.

I've generally found it to be wiser to mend, rather than end, significant relationships.

Only when hope is lost, does termination seem the better course of action. Even then, changing partners without full understanding of the genesis of discord may well result in tragic repetition of the same chronic conflicts.

The community, through its elected representatives, has understandably pressed for change at Holy Cross.

Since Taos County is both the hospital's landlord and a source of funding, it could wield considerable leverage in promoting change in hospital governance and management. Though Holy Cross may not have trumpeted recent its good news clearly and strongly enough, change is already afoot. It's happening in the absence of radical intervention by the County.

For example, there is the noteworthy matter of who is now in charge. The board looks quite different than it did just a few months ago.

Three members with expiring terms, one having served for more than 25-years, were replaced. New appointees bring vital expertise to the board, and the very process for selecting them was a manifestly legitimate one.

It sought the best and the brightest in our midst, irrespective of family or political ties.

Then, there was the recent resignation of the Holy Cross CEO. The opportunity this creates for change cannot be overstated. One hopes, however, that the minimally clarified progress toward a replacement (“ongoing”); recent months’ largely unexplained succession of no fewer than three interim CEOs; and the loss of an excellent COO will not cripple the organization’s capacity for timely and effective action.

While I am loath to see the Taos County Commission exercise its nuclear option, the existence of this “doomsday” threat may have helped command the hospital board’s attention, urging it toward effective dialogue with the community. The commission might best serve the community interest by employing its moral/political authority to persuade Taos Health Systems that it simply must transform itself into a genuinely transparent, accountable, and responsive organization. It could even help the hospital board to understand that transparency means telling the community what it wants to know, and not merely telling the community what you want it to know.

Transparency in the Holy Cross board’s public monthly meeting would be a start.

A good-faith effort would publish the monthly board meeting agenda on the Holy Cross website (scrubbed of inappropriate “consent” items), as well as publishing minutes of the meetings.

Indeed, the board is already on record as committed to publishing “a rolling six months of ... minutes and the proposed upcoming agenda ... on [the hospital] website in the very near future.”

The information packet distributed to board members prior to the monthly meeting should be published on its website as well, redacted only of legally proscribed information. Finally, the monthly meeting should either be streamed live, as are Taos County Commission and Taos Town Council meetings, or recorded and posted on the Hospital website.

Though it may be momentarily satisfying to assign blame for the struggles of this critical institution to the Holy Cross Board, ultimately we all bear some responsibility for any shortcomings. If the board failed to act prudently, effectively, timely, wisely, then we inadvertently colluded with, aided, and/or abetted this. In the end, leaders carry what we put into them. We’re all in this together. So, let’s mend it, not end it.

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