

HEALTH SYSTEM BOARD CHAIR: MERGING CULTURES NOT ALWAYS NECESSARY

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"To the credit of the boards and management teams, they did fully integrate. That could have been very messy with us," Claster says, adding that the two organizations had been "like the Hatfields and McCoys."

Egos had to take a back seat. Part of that resulted from compromise. For example, at first, the two board chairs of the legacy institutions took turns being chair of the combined organization's board. Similarly, there were what Claster calls co-CEOs, although one former CEO was president and one was CEO. After a start in which **the two top leaders clashed**, "I think everyone understood quickly that you can't share those responsibilities like that," says Claster.

Jointly, both boards anointed current North Shore-LIJ President and CEO Michael Dowling as the sole top leader by 2002, after David Dantzker, former president of LIJ, resigned, and after the late Jack Gallagher, president and CEO of North Shore, retired. "We did it because you can't have two masters at the same time," Claster says.

Claster's overall point, after years of fixing bad mergers in his day job, is that boards and management have to be prepared to take risks.

They can't let worries about potential culture clashes cloud their judgment in evaluating the many types of deals and partnership opportunities that exist and that could strengthen the organization. If either of North Shore-LIJ's predecessor organizations had squelched the deal due to what were very real cultural concerns, their present state might be very different.

"If management and boards aren't proactive in this field, they'll get crushed," Claster says. "You have to constantly keep moving and going down paths where you're not sure, and if it's not leading in the right direction, you have to be nimble enough to change course."

Disruption in healthcare is uncomfortable but the chances of success can be greatly improved with a nimble management and board that "never bets the ranch on any single initiative," he says. "There's not a more complicated industry out there, and we've spent millions getting ourselves ready for this, including infrastructure to deal with what we look at as a new world order in which we will be taking care of people from cradle to grave. So take risk, but never take a risk that will take you down if it doesn't work out."