

Leader Profile



Leader Profile:

Rick Merrill

President and CEO

Cook Children's Health Care System (CCHCS)

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— Rick Merrill

One leader's fundamentals: People, passion and a promise

In late 2007, Rick Merrill, President and CEO of Cook Children's Health Care System in Fort Worth, TX, was spending more time out of his office than in it. His first priority in his new role was to go everywhere to meet everyone he could. "I visited with physicians, administrators and managers of the system's various companies, and professionals and staff who worked different shifts," he says. "I asked each of them what Cook Children's did well and what improvements should be our highest priority." The answer: Expand the capacity of Cook Children's Health Care System to keep pace with market growth.

Rick responded by planning and launching a \$250 million expansion project to grow the system's inpatient and outpatient clinical capacity by 40 percent.

This first bold initiative typifies Rick's style and philosophy of leadership. "To me, an effective leader commands respect and at the same time demonstrates genuine caring and a passionate belief in the people he or she works with," he says. "And a leader must have resolve: There are tectonic shifts and uncertainty on the horizon like never before, and it takes resolve to keep an organization moving forward."

Another early effort was to distill Cook Children's mission, vision, over-arching principles and metastrategies down to a single straightforward promise. His goal was to develop a statement that could be easily communicated and embraced by every employee of the organization and resonate with members of the communities they serve. The Cook Children's promise was the ultimate result of a series of retreats Rick led with physicians, board members and system staff. It is: *Knowing that every child's life is sacred, it is the promise of Cook Children's to improve the health of every child in our region through the prevention and treatment of illness, disease and injury.*

"Promise is a very powerful word; it's a word that resonates not only with a grandparent, but a six-year-old understands it," he said. "Now, when I talk to audiences about what we're trying to accomplish, I share our promise. It's a very simple statement that everyone can understand."

Rick ranks his team as the most important factor in making sure Cook Children's delivers on its promise. "Without our staff, all we'd have is bricks and mortar," he says. "People breathe life into the organization. That's why I make people my highest priority." His approach to assembling a high-achieving team is to seek out people with the right baseline skills and capabilities. Then he expects each person he hires to have a sense of humor, high integrity and that his team members "leave themselves at the door." With the right people pursuing the right goals, he gives them the room they need to do their jobs.

"It's difficult to introduce a new style of leadership when you follow a successful CEO who led the organization for 25 years," Rick says. "I made sure I was out and about a lot; I wanted our staff to see me and get to know me." He continues to rely on webcasts and

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employee town hall meetings to promote what he calls “leading through engaging.” And he holds himself accountable, working to fulfill the same expectations he has of his employees.

Rick expects nothing less than for Fort Worth to be the healthiest place to raise a child in the U.S. He points out that moving the needle on children’s health issues — obesity, diabetes, and accidents and injuries — will have a significant impact on the cost of care and the economy in general. “We are measuring the health status of children in the communities we serve,” he says. “We’ll determine our baseline using available data, so we’ll be able to measure the difference we make going forward.”

As time has passed, Rick notes, his career focus has evolved. “I want to make a difference that has some significance in this world.” Over the years, he has experienced a great deal, which has led to what he considers to be one of the single greatest management truths: “People are multi-dimensional; we learn in different ways and act out of different motivations,” he says. “There’s the intellectual dimension — a straightforward decision-making approach that relies primarily on the facts. Then there’s the emotional side, but that approach can become noisy and overbearing. Acting on emotions alone will get us into trouble much of the time. Finally, there’s the heart dimension. This is the part of us that is usually quiet and unassuming, and yet it is where we usually find the right answer. It’s not always easy to understand why the heart is urging us to make a particular decision. But, in my experience, the heart is where the best decision-making comes from. Sometimes, you just have to listen to your heart, and your intellect and emotions will catch up.”

Rick Merrill is focused on his goals and gets things done. He expects much of himself and sets equally high standards for his team. He is passionate about people, those who work for him and those in the communities he serves. He balances his own career objectives with a strong commitment to his organization. But there’s more to Rick Merrill. This leader is a published songwriter and a student of history, especially World War II and Winston Churchill. He’s a cook and a cartoonist. And he makes choices that suit his family as well as serving his career.

“I was told early on in my career about the man who spent all of his health to gain his wealth, only to turn around and spend all of his wealth to regain his health,” he says. “I work hard to be successful at both doing my job well and doing what’s right to keep my family strong.”

Witt/Kieffer is proud to have consulted with the Cook Children’s Health Care System on this important executive search assignment.

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