

Famed Flashbacks

Servant leader recognizes and respects roots while celebrating community and cooperation

By Fred W. Crans

SCHAUMBURG, IL (December 3, 2024) – They say that “less is more,” but sometimes that adage is a gross exaggeration. From the Bellwether League Foundation website, the following is the thumbnail sketch of Brent Johnson:



“Brent T. Johnson relied on decades of supply chain experience in other industries to develop Intermountain Healthcare’s highly regarded consolidated service center, which has served as a model for other healthcare organizations to emulate, as well as to implement a self-distribution strategy generating noteworthy benefits for his organization and the patients served and extending potential boundaries for others.”

This is not a thumbnail; it is a thumbnail of a thumbnail in that it certainly does not do justice to the legacy and career of Brent Johnson.

There have been few people in the Healthcare Supply Chain of whom I have

been in personal awe. The names that come to mind from my personal experience include such Bellwethers as Charles Housley (2008), Tom Hughes (2012), Karen Conway (2023), Dick Perrin (2014), Bob Simpson (2012), Dr. Eugene Schneller (2024) and more recently, Conrad Emmerich from BLF Bronze Sustaining Sponsor Atrium Health and inaugural Ammer Honoree Dr. Randy Bradley (2020).

Add to that list Brent Johnson.

You may have heard the old saw, “Your reputation precedes you.” That statement is particularly true of Brent Johnson. He was one of those folks who came to our discipline from outside healthcare and stayed long enough and worked hard enough to leave an enduring legacy – building Intermountain Health into a world class operation and spawning a class of next generation leaders to carry the discipline into the future.

You likely heard about Brent Johnson before you met him.

When I first started seeing him at the national meetings and conferences, I was afraid to introduce myself. I didn’t believe I was bright enough to carry on an intelligent conversation with him. He was that intimidating.

As the years went by, I encountered Brent more frequently and after making colorfully creative trousers a major part of my personal brand, we would often exchange pleasantries (although I still considered myself “not worthy”).

Recently, I had the pleasure of interviewing Brent for an episode of “Taking the Supply Chain Pulse,” BLF Silver Sustaining Sponsor St. Onge Co.’s weekly podcast, of which I am the host. To say I was surprised and impressed with my guest would be a massive understatement.

On one hand, Brent was exactly what I thought him to be – a no nonsense, straight-talking guy who told the truth directly and with a minimum of words. On the other hand, he came across as humble and unassuming. There was no, “Hey, look at me. Ain’t I great?” in Brent Johnson. He showed faith in the folks he hired. In an industry where reducing FTEs is far more prevalent than acquiring them, Brent had a simple mantra and a single sales pitch: “Let me hire someone for \$100,000 a year and I guarantee they will save the organization \$1 million.”

Intermountain Health let him hire those people, and they delivered time after time. And he gave the credit for their accomplishments to them.

So, when the time came for Brent Johnson to retire in 2016, you might expect that he would take a well-earned world tour to savor the fruits of his labors.

Well, that's exactly what he did. Sort of.

You see, Brent Johnson is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and one of the tenets of that religious group is the idea of going on "missions" to minister to people in need around the world. In the case of Brent and his wife, that place was Oaxaca, Mexico, from July 2016 to January 2018. Brent and his wife lived with, learned from, mentored and shared life experiences with some of the poorest people in the North American continent. Brent says the experience was life-changing and that our unenlightened image of Mexico and its people is way off the mark. He marveled at how they could subsist and thrive on very little – how good they were and how we all could learn a lesson from the dignified yet simple lives they lead.

It's amazing how you can change your entire opinion about someone in a 30-minute podcast. Prior to our conversation, I had viewed Brent as a hard-nosed, all-business guy, and in 30 short minutes, I discovered his reputation as a servant leader was genuine and legitimate because he had learned as much from the simple folks in rural Mexico as he had in the boardrooms of the United States.

This proves an important tenet of authentic leadership: Until you talk to someone face to face and heart to heart, you probably don't have enough information to form an opinion.

Brent deserves to be in the Bellwether Class of 2014 because he earned it – a fact that continues to resonate today, more than a decade later.

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