

FROM THE PAGES OF *LEADERS & LUMINARIES* E-MAGAZINE ...

Vintage Voice

Stretch your imagination in 2025

Supply chain makes healthcare go forward and the world run around

By Rick Dana Barlow

SCHAUMBURG, IL (January 20, 2025) – As wildfires swept through swaths of Los Angeles this month, you likely saw a cornucopia of photos and videos giving you a bird’s eye view of the horrific destruction of property and displacement of families and people.

Nestled among those disastrous scenes in the darkness were beacons of hope – unnamed volunteers moving pallets of donations – from clothing to food to water – as a significant component of the relief efforts for victims of this weather-related tragedy as well as those that are battling its handiwork – among them firefighters, first responders, paramedics and police officers. And you likely heard of people opening their homes and businesses for neighbors and strangers to decompress for the time being.

For sure, that’s charity. But that’s also ... supply chain. Both deserve and have earned thanks.

Regardless of the Dickensian best of times or worst of times, supply chain delivers. In times of crisis, it simply must; in times of daily operations and routines, it most



certainly must. The first is instinctual; the second is contractual and therefore expected. Without supply chain, eventually we would be depleted and destitute. Supply chain fends that off – consistently and constantly.

We may view disaster films as a source of escapist entertainment – whether they involve alien invasions, deep freezes, earthquakes, floods, infernos, twisters and a spate of others since the moving pictures debuted more than a century ago. They represent something therapeutic where we can subdue our stress for a time or even transfer some of it to fictional characters grappling with something both outlandish and outrageous because we know the protagonist(s) will solve the problems within three viewing hours tops.

When reel life pokes through the fictional fabric and afflicts real life – for example, hijacked commercial jets flown into skyscrapers, cargo container shipping vessels blocking transit canals, gigantic barges slamming into bridge structural supports, flooding/hurricanes/mudslides/tornados/wildfires decimating cities/towns/villages and regions – we experience a melodramatic wake-up call. Yet potential solutions aren't scripted and carefully choreographed within minutes with cleanup and restoration accomplished within hours.

Real life is just that – real. And as we've now seen, when tragedy strikes in real life then one of the butterfly/domino effects involves hampering production of reel life.

The link between reel and real lives aren't dimensions within a multiverse (in which reel lives can indulge). It's imagination.

I've written about two soberingly striking phrases uttered by two different subject matter experts about crises and appropriate responses – particularly unplanned. One expert commented in a 9/11 documentary on the History Channel that continues to resonate. Considering the possibility of hijackers flying commercial jets into buildings as weapons was inconceivable: "There was a systemwide failure of imagination." Another who commented on the container ship slamming into the Baltimore harbor bridge: "It never occurred to anybody." Both are timeless and as we've experienced, they're *real*. Going forward we must add them to our imagination lexicon and expand it, extend it.

Now add the prospect of 100+-mile-per-hour winds changing course and shifting “magically” to whip up a small brushfire into a forest-fed inferno snaking through residential and commercial areas within minutes and hours, lasting for days and even weeks.

Add another tenet, another wrinkle to the quiver of calamity. For supply chain, crisis management is nothing new. It’s part of the department’s, the function’s and the team’s circulatory system. It’s like antibody white blood cells battling the cancer of anonymity, ennui, myopia, neglect and negligence.

Within the field of pure mathematics, the specialty of topology concentrates on properties of shapes that can be deformed and reformed, squished and stretched, bent and twisted without fundamentally sacrificing the connectedness and continuity of borders. Think of reshaping a rhombus or square into a circle or oval. Just as matter cannot be created nor destroyed, properties of something can be preserved through manipulation and reshaping.

Such logic can and should be applied to supply chain, whether it plans for or reacts to crises and day-to-day operations.

The start of any given year tends to beget lists of “things to accomplish.” Some are timelessly annual, if not perennial; others represent goals to achieve based on market forces and cultural mores.

For supply chain, which makes healthcare go forward and the world run around, here are several organically operational aims to carry out amid wrestling with budgets, costs and pricing, contractual decisions, labor waves, demanding customers and partners, suppliers that stumble in service when expectations and promises don’t mesh and technologies both alluring and seductive.

Within and throughout the vertical “figure 8” or horizontal “infinity sign” of supply chain ...

1. **Recognize your customers.** Make sure each team member during the year spends several days rounding, personally and professionally listening to, observing, thanking and understanding customers – particularly the

clinicians on the front lines and the researchers in the backrooms that supply chain supports from the background.

2. **Recognize your suppliers and service companies.** Sure, they make promises to secure your business, but they face crises and disasters just like you do. Some of the crises and disasters you face reverberate from theirs, but weather-related and man-made challenges impact everyone – including how you service your customers. Complaining about and finger-pointing questionable strategic and tactical decisions generally doesn't lead to solutions or therapeutic stress relief.
3. **Recognize your colleagues and team members.** Together, you all make a difference. You circulate the devices, products and services that reinforce the lifeline of healthcare. You fortify the processes and professionals who make facilities and operations hum and rumble forward.
4. **Recognize your patients.** Whether you recognize or want to admit it, they count on you. Yes, you. Supply chain. Myriad players contribute to the convoluted – and oftentimes inefficient – healthcare system within which we operate today, but each represents a component of the engine that keeps us on the road to progress using a map of endless and imaginative possibilities.

As you start 2025, stretch your imagination, show your appreciation and saddle up for what likely will be a turbulent ride – but one certainly going forward.

Rick Dana Barlow serves as Co-Founder and Executive Director, Bellwether League Foundation, and Executive Editor of BLF's Leaders & Luminaries e-magazine. Barlow's column, Vintage Voice, is posted/published in Leaders & Luminaries and here. Barlow has nearly four decades of journalistic editorial experience, more than 30 years of which have been dedicated to covering a cornucopia of healthcare operational topics, including supply chain, sterile processing, surgical services, infection prevention, information technology, diagnostic imaging and radiology and laboratory for a variety of print and online media outlets. For more, visit Bellwether League Foundation's web site at <https://www.bellwetherleague.org/> and Barlow's online profile at <https://rickdanabarlow.wixsite.com/wingfootmedia>.