Burkenroad Symposium looks at leadership

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In her introductory remarks at this year's Burkenroad Symposium on Business and Society, moderator Laura Cardinal said she hoped to present a "kaleidoscope" of perspectives on critical leadership, and that's just what the four speakers assembled for this year's program provided.

"Critical Moments in Leadership: Changing the Rules of the Game," the topic of the 15th annual symposium, examined the issue of critical leadership from perspectives including corporate governance, crisis management, government and personal values.

Holly J. Gregory, a partner at the law firm Weil, Gotshal & Manges, led off the speakers with a discussion of corporate governance in the wake of recent scandals involving companies like Enron, Tyco and Converse Technology. Gregory, who counsels corporate clients on governance issues and has served on the "fix-up" teams hired to right organizations in the wake of scandals, said the rules of corporate governance have changed in recent years, but not dramatically.

"It isn't a change in direction so much as a bringing to light of the accountability paradigm that was always intended in governance--managers who are really accountable to boards of directors and boards of directors who are really accountable to the shareholders," Gregory said. "A recurring theme in corporate governance that's been highlighted by many of these corporate crises is the need for the board to continually insure that it has the best managers running the company, and by best I mean best in terms of performance but also best in terms of leadership and ethics."

Bill Carey, the author of Leave No One Behind: Hurricane Katrina and the Rescue of Tulane Hospital, followed Gregory with a discussion of the response of HCA, the operators of Tulane Hospital, to the crisis of Katrina. HCA spent thousands of dollars preparing for Katrina prior to its arrival, but the company also issued a general directive to its employees at the hospital to do anything necessary to run the hospital and take care of patients.

"This directive was far more important than preparation," Carey said. "If they had done nothing to get ready, this would have saved them, and if they'd done twice as much to get ready but didn't have this general directive and this spirit, it wouldn't have worked."

Carey cited the example of the hospital's CEO, who took the initiative to tear down light poles on the roof of its parking garage to enable rescue helicopters to land.

"With 20/20 hindsight it seems very logical that this is what they would have done," Carey said. "But there are environments where people would worry about taking down these street lights."

Frank Stewart Jr., chairman of Stewart Enterprises, brought the discussion to a more personal level with a discussion of his approach to critical decisions throughout his career. Good decision making, Stewart said, requires subordinating one's ego. "Ego is the cause of wars, divorces and failure in business," Stewart said. "You need to be honest and open enough to know we don't have all the answers and other people in life are very important."

Sam Mok, managing member of the management consulting firm Condor International Advisors and former CFO of the U.S. Department Labor, closed out the symposium with a discussion of leadership from a government perspective. Mok cited the example of Admiral Thad Allen, commander of the U.S. Coast Guard, who took over the federal government's response to Katrina when FEMA Director Michael Brown was relieved of duty. Mok said that Allen told him the Coast Guard succeeded where FEMA had failed because it treated Katrina not as a natural disaster but as a weapon of mass destruction. Responding to the storm in that way made all the difference.

"You have to know how to diagnose the problem and use the right playbook," Mok concluded. "The critical moment in leadership at that time was identifying the problem correctly."

The Burkenroad Symposium, an annual presentation of the Burkenroad Institute for the Study of Ethics and Leadership in Management at the Freeman School, took place on Friday, March 7, in the Kendall Cram Lecture Hall of the Lavin-Bernick Center.