HCA chief highlights Tulane Business Forum

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The most innovative idea in the world isn't worth a nickel if you don't execute it properly.

That was the central message of Richard M. Bracken, president and COO of Hospital Corp. of America, the world's largest private operator of health care facilities, in his keynote luncheon address at the 29th annual Tulane Business Forum.

The forum, an annual presentation of the Tulane Association of Business Alumni, took place on Friday, Oct. 17, at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside. More than 700 local business leaders attended this year's event.

The theme of this year's forum was innovation, and Bracken used the opportunity to discuss some of the innovative ideas that have guided the growth of HCA.

"You really don't get the chance to do big, earth-shattering ideas in every environment, but a lot of really good things come from small changes," Bracken said.

He cited a program HCA initiated to reduce hospital-acquired infections, a major problem in the health care industry. By creating a simple program that encouraged clinicians to wash their hands more frequently-and executing that program effectively by involving clinicians, administrators and even patients in the process-HCA was able to reduce infections inside its hospitals dramatically.

"Surgical-acquired infections went down by half," Bracken said. "Bloodstream infections went down by about a third. We had stunning results. This is a fine example that small changes can lead to big gains."

Bracken also discussed some of the innovation-related mistakes HCA has made over the years, including a 1995 effort to streamline its supply chain in the style of Wal-Mart. HCA made the mistake of implementing that change in operations from the top down, and the company ended up paying the price.

"It was a great idea, but it was poorly executed," Bracken said. "It went nowhere in a hurry, not because the idea was wrong but because the execution was wrong."

Bracken said that HCA went back to the drawing board and re-implemented the effort, this time from the bottom up, and the streamlining program became a success.

"Innovation is really a leadership problem," Bracken added. "It's not a problem with your employees. It's about embracing it and structuring it and putting it where it's going to have some chance for success."

Bracken, a Tulane parent, got a laugh at the beginning of his presentation by praising Tulane University as a leader in innovation, not so much for its role in the recovery of New Orleans or the transformation of public education but for the transformation of his two sons.

Bracken showed the audience two sets of photos of Richard Bracken Jr. (L '09) and Robert Bracken (A '08). In the first set, Richard, with a guitar perched on his lap, looked up from beneath a mop of shaggy hair while Robert smiled blissfully while traveling in South America. In the second set of photos, both Richard and Robert were cleanly shaven and wearing coats and ties.

"Tulane worked some pretty serious innovation on these guys," Bracken said. "It took me about two months to get this second set of pictures done, but my great thanks to the faculty of Tulane and their respective colleges for really working some magic on these fellas."

In addition to Bracken, this year's forum featured a wide range of speakers addressing the role of innovation, including retired Maj. Gen. David M. Mize of Apogen Technologies/QinetiQ, Debra Neill Baker and Edwin Neill III of Neil Corp., William F. Borne of Amedisys, Jim Bridger of New Orleans Public Belt Railroad, Todd M. Hornbeck of Hornbeck Offshore Services Inc., and Matthew M. Wisdom of TurboSquid Inc.