## Peter J. Miller

## **Breaking Ground**

Peter Miller is a lover of firsts. He is the man who is eager to be first on stage to present an idea. He is the man who's tapped to build a project from the ground up. He is a pioneer. But being first is never easy. Today, as a Regional CEO for Vibra Healthcare, Peter still remembers vividly a defining moment in his career that began as a first, evolved into a crisis, but then ultimately served as a propelling force that launched him into the rest of his life.

Peter was the Director of Rehabilitation at

a Catholic hospital at the time, and for a while, everything was clicking. Following a string of successes, he was presented with an opportunity to do what he loved: develop a new project and bring it to launch. He would build a specialty hospital within a hospital. "Being first isn't necessarily about having the most brilliant ideas," he explains. "It's about seeing the opportunity in an idea and being the first one out there to put that idea into practice. It's about encountering the unexpected and taming a raw environment."

Once the new project was up and running, Peter was offered what he had yearned for ever since he entered the industry straight out of a Masters in Health Care Administration program at Texas State University: to become the CEO and administrator of a hospital. "At 42 years old," Peter says, "I finally achieved my heart's desire to become the CEO of a small hospital. And at first, I had great success. I was free to keep in motion the principles I had implemented in building the hospital in the first place." A year after becoming CEO, however, he witnessed the buyout of the company that operated the hospital. And new ownership brought a new governing philosophy.

"The management style flipped from bottom-up to top-down," Peter recalls. "It was a challenge, and I learned a lot about myself. I learned that I did best when I was allowed to maneuver and when I could express my creativity in solving problems. When the hospital was first sold, my gut had told me that the new owner might not be a good fit for me. But I had a family and young children, and in the interest of stability, I was determined to make the transition work."

Despite this optimism, the culture clash that ensued did not go well, and Peter suddenly found himself in a moment of crisis—he lost his job. Having brought his wife and children to a new city, the situation wasn't just stressful, but

almost panic-inducing. "I thought I was having a heart attack," Peter recalls. "It was frightening. But in getting over that brief scare, I learned something very important about perspective. Today, as always, I take my work very seriously. I'm passionate and I believe I do real, lasting good in my profession. But I also don't beat myself up when things don't go the way they're supposed to. I do the best job I can and treat people fairly. I don't get too serious about my own ego.

Because along with striving for success and being on the fast track, you need to carry the realization that the world is not going to end if you don't get that big project done—particularly if you've done your best. The worst thing that can happen to you professionally is not really that bad. You still have your family and health. You still have who you are."

Coming out on the other side of this experience equipped Peter for the successes that would follow—successes that would build his career as an operator and leader with the pioneering spirit that has always been a hallmark of his character. Serving as a Regional CEO for Vibra Healthcare is the most recent installment in that career, allowing him to lead facilities that are truly unique in the healthcare space.

"Many of Vibra's hospitals are unique in that they're called *long term acute care* hospitals," Peter explains. "Unlike your typical acute care hospital, which admits patients for a relatively short stay, long term acute care hospitals focus on patients who stay around 25 days or more. We work with these patients who have diseases like diabetes or hypertension. Or maybe they're on a ventilator or need dialysis, and we address those needs and keep them from being re-admitted to the hospital."

In this specialty field of healthcare, Peter faces a new frontier—a complex regulatory environment, increasing competition, and shifting demographics. "As health care dollars compress," he says, "acute care hospitals are looking to move their patients out sooner. Technology is changing. The relationship between government and healthcare is rapidly evolving. It's an interesting time, and we're excited to be at the forefront of this mercurial industry."

If there's any man that relishes the challenge of a new environment, it's Peter. Next to the external challenges of a changing healthcare world, there are the internal dynamics playing out behind the scenes of any hospital. "Healthcare is fascinating," Peter says. "It's diverse and dynamic, and I think that's why I like it. There are no unimportant jobs in a hospital"

Vibra Healthcare is a privately traded healthcare firm based in Pennsylvania that in April of 2013 acquired 15 long term acute care hospitals containing over a thousand licensed hospital beds, one inpatient rehabilitation hospital with 44 beds, and one skilled nursing facility with 135 beds. The acquisition brings Vibra Healthcare's specialty hospital and outpatient rehabilitation count to 92, which operate across 18 states and employ over 5,000 people in the post acute arena. Founded in 2004 by Brad Hollinger, Steve Marcus, Don Yoder, Clint Feegan, and Tom Durkin, the organization's partners and founders have more than a century of combined hospital experience in the specialty's niche.

Peter had spent four years in his previous position as the CEO of Specialty Hospital of Washington—Hadley, and as the Senior VP of Specialty Hospitals of America, when a recruiter called him about a Resource CEO position for Vibra. In that capacity, he would help fill in around the country while the company placed permanent CEOs within its ranks. "That concept appealed to my wanderlust," he laughs. When he went in to interview, however, Vibra's leadership

team was impressed by his experience in multistate operations and by his performance on a psychological tool called the Predictive Index, which reported him as a great fit. With that, they offered him the Regional CEO role instead, beginning with two acquisitions in Charleston, South Carolina and Richmond, Virginia. Peter is among the first regional CEOs Vibra Healthcare hired from outside the company, entrusting him to guide the helm in initiating these new acquisitions into the corporate culture. "Like at Hadley, I really felt at home at Vibra Healthcare facilities the minute I walked in," he says. "I could feel it in my gut. The same could be said going back to my earlier days working for Noland Health. When I walk into a hospital and it feels warm and welcoming, I know I'm in the right place."

For someone like Peter who places a premium on engagement as the integrity of a project is built from the ground up, having a direct connection to the operations of his hospitals is important. "I supervise my direct reports, and they supervise their team leaders," he says, "but I am intent on being directly involved in building the hospital's culture. Central to that culture is a focus on safety. I've learned that it is too easy for good, well-meaning people to allow things to slip through the cracks, even if there is a system in place to prevent that. With this in mind, it's vital to have a culture where someone will stand up and say, 'something is not right here.' employees who will speak up, and we want a culture of people who hold each other accountable in a non-punitive way."

Peter compares his system to one that can be found in the aerospace industry. "That industry is a leader when it comes to the no-blame reporting systems that promote accountability and innovation," he explains. "It's one of the reasons airline travel is so safe. When there is a near-miss, it's immediately reported and investigated. They won't necessarily fire the people who made a mistake—they just want to know what happened. I like to call it a just culture, and it's a philosophy I hope to implement here at Vibra."

Peter's exposure to the aerospace industry can be traced to his father, who worked as an electrical engineer during the space race in the 1960s. As Peter has done with his own family, his father moved their family several times through his childhood across the southwest United States, from California to Texas. The oldest of six

children, Peter was an inquisitive child, and his parents encouraged him to appreciate music and the arts. His strong passion for sports, as well, could only be one-upped by his mother. "She cracks my brother and me up," Peter smiles. "She loves pretty much every sport, and she'll chat us up about the point spread. Our dad loves Arkansas football and the Cowboys, but mom is crazy about the Utah Utes, Peyton Manning, baseball, and everything else."

Although he is now a very different person, Peter describes his father's influence on him as profound. "When I was younger, I idolized him," Peter says. "Then, in the 1960s and 70s, I almost went 180 degrees in a youthful rebellion, rejecting everything he stood for. If he was a Republican, I was a Democrat. If he had barely half a beer on Saturday nights, then I would drink. If he was Catholic, I was agnostic. But as I got older, I found myself in more and more ways like him. The things about both my parents that drove me crazy are now who I am. Maybe that's why they drove me so crazy."

After time away from the Catholic Church as a younger man, Peter now goes every Sunday, and it's an integral part of his identity. He also fondly recalls his involvement in the Boy Scouts of America and is a strong proponent of both youth and professional organizations. Now, as a fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives, Peter carries a prestigious credential that signifies board certification in healthcare management. He has four children, and his wife, Denise, also works in healthcare in Northern Virginia as a psychiatric liaison. "Denise is an extraordinary person," Peter says, "and I learn from her every day."

His achievements have also been the products of incredible mentorship throughout the years—people who were willing to invest their time and energy in Peter as he sought to break ground of his own. "Any successful businessman knows that, in addition to his own ambition and hard work, there was a whole infrastructure of people that made his success possible," Peter says. "In my life, it has not always been people whom I've sought out. It's been people I've crossed paths

with who turned out to be role models. I like people genuinely, and it was many of the individuals I worked with whom I admired that made strong impressions on me."

Looking back, Peter is most proud of the many hospital and healthcare structures he has been able to open all over the country throughout his career. "These facilities and programs have served people, and they've created jobs," he says. "Perhaps most importantly, however, they provide a vital service that has made people's lives better." And looking forward, in advising young people entering the working world today and in reflecting upon the prospects of Vibra Healthcare, Peter sees great opportunity in the health care industry as a whole. "Despite the fact that the economy is tough students today are graduating with considerable debt, I strongly feel that it's time for bright, smart people with nothing to lose to jump in head first and revolutionize the way we structure healthcare in this country," he affirms. "As health service revenue is declining and costs are going up, the opportunities are immense. All of this is coming to a head. We need to be smarter and faster. We need to break ground, and Vibra Healthcare stands with shovel in hand."

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