

Famed Flashbacks

Bosom buds

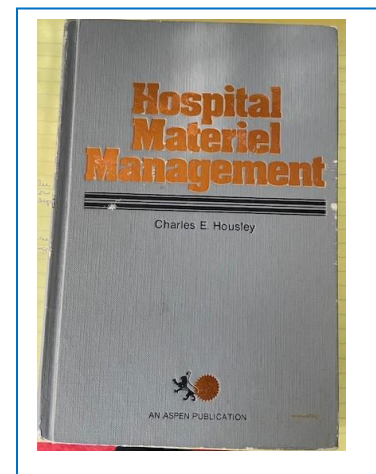
By Fred W. Crans

SCHAUMBURG, IL (January 29, 2024) – Back in the ‘70s and ‘80s, no one in his right mind would have the temerity to call Charles E. Housley (Bellwether Class of 2008) “Chuck.” Housley was one of the true pioneers in what was to become known as Materials Management and gradually evolve to the present-day term of Supply Chain.

A different kind of cat, Housley eschewed the Americanized “Materials” for the higher-class English term, “Materiel,” which became the title of the prestigious *Hospital Materiel Management Quarterly*, published by the Aspen Press. He also authored the seminal book on the topic: *Hospital Materiel Management*, a copy of which sells today on eBay for \$150.

Quoting from Bellwether League Foundation’s Hall of Fame for Healthcare Supply Chain Leadership profile of Housley, his career accomplishments included the following:

- Helped pioneer the concept of just-in-time and stockless distribution agreements with American Hospital Supply Corp., a radical idea in the 1970s and 1980s made possible by the fact that the distributor maintained a warehouse across the street from his hospital – but he chose to implement the programs, which was risky in and of itself.



- Mastered the use of exchange carts, PAR levels and case carts, as well as forecasting and master planning.
- Required daily rounds to all nursing units by materials managers.
- Retooled the concept of product evaluation and standardization, emphasizing the need for product formularies – ideas that became part of the value analysis branding in the 1990s.
- Firmly and strongly advocated that materials management should represent a strong force in a hospital and be led by a senior-level executive.
- Promoted connections between pharmacy and materials management.
- Staunch advocate for educating, training and credentialing materials managers who needed to be creative and critical thinkers who were strategically minded and not people who merely pushed boxes around for years.



Charles E. Housley, Bellwether Class of 2008

The best way to characterize Charles Housley is as the face of healthcare materials management in the 1970s and 1980s. He was one of the first to recognize the essential role materials management – and materials managers – played in hospital finance and operations and was one of the earliest proponents of elevating the position to an executive level. In short, he put materials management on the map in a purchasing world, forcing the profession to look at hospitals as a business.

Oh yes, he became CEO of Appalachian Regional Medical Center as well.

Housley teemed with self-esteem. Tall, steely-eyed, perfectly coiffed (a single hair was never awry ... ever), Housley cut an imposing figure in the '70s and '80s, and he reveled in his hard-won glory.

But, as with many great men, there was a second person who contributed to his success.

The Lone Ranger had Tonto, Batman had Robin, Roy Rogers had Gabby Hayes, Sherlock Holmes had Dr. Watson, Thelma had Louise, Doc Brown had Marty McFly and Woody had Buzz Lightyear.

For Charles Housley, that person was Bert Vonderahe.

Vonderahe was a vice president for American Hospital Supply Corp., which shared the other side of Housley's hospital's parking lot. Historically, American Hospital Supply was the grandfather of today's Cardinal Health. It was the largest medical/surgical supply distributor in the country, and Vonderahe saw the possibilities in Housley's brainstorming and had the juice to get his company to support them.

The two men could not have been more different. Vonderahe was short, unassuming, quiet and did not seek the limelight. He was more than willing to let Housley garner the fame his ideas generated while he turned those ideas into a fortune for American.

The two became fast friends, palling around in Columbus. Vonderahe knew how to work with Housley. For example: Housley was a local high school basketball referee and he often asked Vonderahe to attend his games to watch the high school kids play and to watch him referee. Vonderahe would often videotape the games so Housley could watch himself referee.

I got to know Vonderahe well when I was at MetroHealth in Cleveland in the early '90s. I had convinced the hospital to join a group purchasing organization (GPO) and select American Hospital Supply as its Prime Vendor. Several of American Hospital Supply's big wheels came to Cleveland for a celebratory kick-off dinner. During that dinner I discovered that Vonderahe was a graduate of the Wharton School.

Eventually, both men moved on. Housley became CEO of Appalachian Regional Medical Center in Hazard, Kentucky. Vonderahe took a different route. One Friday, he retired from American Hospital Supply, complete with going-away lunches and laudatory speeches, only to return the following Tuesday.

To mow the lawn.

You see, Vonderahe owned a lawn care company that won the contract for American Hospital Supply's campus and the former American Hospital Supply executive was the newest grass cutter in Columbus, Ohio.

Both bosom buds saw green throughout their respective careers.

Fred W. Crans, Bellwether Class of 2020, has more than five decades of healthcare supply chain experience and service in a variety of executive leadership roles that spans military and private-sector communities as well as provider, supplier, group purchasing organization and consultant segments. He currently serves on the Advisory Council of Bellwether League Foundation and as Healthcare Business Development Executive for St. Onge Co. For more, visit Bellwether League Foundation's web site at <https://www.bellwetherleague.org/>.