

# Famed Flashbacks

## Heeding, learning from a future Hall of Famer

*Sage words of wisdom motivated another future Hall of Famer a dozen years later*

By Fred W. Crans

**SCHAUMBURG, IL (February 16, 2024)** – I only met Tom Kelly once, but the advice he gave me changed my career. Kelly was in the Bellwether League’s Hall of Fame for Healthcare Supply Chain Leadership’s inaugural class in 2008. His official profile summary reads:



Thomas W. Kelly, Bellwether Class of 2008

Kelly spent a decade of his supply chain management career at one of the oldest and most venerable institutions in the nation – Massachusetts General Hospital – where he restructured the facility’s purchasing organization to be more responsive to the needs of hospital employees and vendors, as well as control costs through standardization, value analysis and workflow improvements. With his 35 years as an adjunct professor of management information systems/information technology at Northeastern University, Kelly established and maintained a micro distributed computerized system for finance, purchasing and materials flow for a large healthcare network in the Northeast.

My one and only meeting with Mr. Kelly took place around 1990. I had just received my MBA a couple of years before and had recently been named Director

of Materials Management at a multi-hospital system in the Northeast. The system was in its formative state, and two hospitals and their leadership teams and respective staff were in the process of establishing the merged entity. At the department level, folks from both hospitals were openly vying for key positions. I came in as a complete outsider and was given the task of forming a cohesive team.

Needless to say, as an outsider, I was not the most popular player in the game. The person I was replacing as Director had gotten kicked upstairs. He became a Vice President of Operations, and he was also my boss. It would be fair to say that he and I did not see eye to eye on all things. He was an East Coast guy, and I was a kid from the backwoods of Upstate New York who had served in Vietnam and lived in Miami and Ohio. As far as common ground, we had virtually none.

To say the very least, I was in over my head and struggling. But I hung in, built key relationships and slowly made positive changes.

Along the way, the system's Chief Information Officer (CIO) hired renowned consulting firm Concepts in Healthcare (CIH) to take a look at the nascent information systems and devise an integrated one. It was during this engagement that I met Tom Hughes, later to be inducted into the Hall of Fame for Healthcare Supply Chain Leadership's Bellwether Class of 2012, for the first time.

It was also when I met Tom Kelly.

As part of the information gathering process, the CIH team conducted interviews with various department directors. I was interviewed by Mr. Kelly. When we met, I had no idea of Mr. Kelly's background. All I knew was that he and his consulting firm were working with our IT team.

We met in my office. Mr. Kelly was an engaging man who quickly put me at ease. He didn't have to ask too many questions. Of course, at that point in my career, a simple interrogatory could set off a long rant.

During my rant, I regurgitated everything that I was dealing with, told him how frustrated I was and that I really wanted to get away from Materials Management to become a hospital administrator.

Mr. Kelly patiently listened to my endless ramblings, and I finally ran out of things to complain about. He never interrupted me. He just let me go on and on.

When he knew for certain that I had exhausted my agenda, he calmly said, “Fred, you appear to be a bright young man. You have a great deal of enthusiasm and a significant amount of good ideas. Don’t let yourself get frustrated. Maybe you could get a job as an Assistant Administrator somewhere. But don’t think for a moment that getting such a job would guarantee your future success.

“You see, Assistant Administrators and even COOs are **generalists**. They are a dime a dozen. You have a **specialty**. Learn everything you can about Materials Management. Become the best Director of Materials Management you can be, and you will always be in demand and you will never have to worry about having a job. Don’t be foolish and throw what you have away just because you think you could attain a more prestigious title.”

Now, I’m a pretty bullheaded guy. For me, often the sweetest sound is the sound of my own voice. But for some reason, what Mr. Kelly told me made sense. I stuck to my career in Materials Management/Supply Chain and, in 2020, I was honored to join Tom Kelly in the Bellwether League Foundation’s Hall of Fame for Healthcare Supply Chain Leadership.



The moral of the story? When a Hall of Famer talks, **LISTEN!**

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