

Compassionate Leadership

An Interview with Donato J. Tramuto, Chairman and Founder, Health eVillages

EDITORS' NOTE Donato Tramuto is the former CEO of Tivity Health and is widely recognized for his commitment to social change and transformational leadership in healthcare innovation that led The New York Times to deem him “a global health activist.” Tramuto is also the founder and chair of the Tramuto Foundation which advances young people’s rights to education and healthcare access and combats human rights violations. Since the launch of the foundation, over 100 young adults have received a Tramuto Foundation Scholarship to pursue their dream of a college education and many organizations have received financial and partnership support helping them deliver on their promise to make the world a more equitable place. His three-decade commitment to social change and innovation has earned numerous awards, including the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy Ripple of Hope Award and the RFK Embracing the Legacy Award. Tramuto currently serves as a member of the board of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and is chairman of its Leadership Council where his foundation has committed to funding a three-year, \$1 million grant to address workplace bullying, leading a national initiative to address workplace dignity and inclusion in the U.S. and Europe. Tramuto is a passionate champion of cutting-edge approaches to healthcare access, drug safety, and addressing the social determinants of health (SDOH), defined by the World Health Organization as the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. Under his tenure as CEO of Tivity Health and following his execution of a successful turnaround, he transformed the business model to center around partnering progressively, profitably and collaboratively with consumers, payers, healthcare practitioners and employers in cutting-edge approaches to SDOH conditions including nutrition, fitness and social connection that improve health outcomes and reduce medical costs. Before joining Tivity Health, Tramuto’s record of bringing together social commitment with healthcare innovation included his founding of



Donato J. Tramuto

Physicians Interactive Holdings (Aptus Health sold to WebMD in 2019), a global provider of insight-driven digital engagement solutions for healthcare professionals and consumers. Reflecting a conviction that universal healthcare is a basic human right for all people, he launched Health eVillages in 2011. Tramuto is a member of the Brown University Healthcare Leadership Board, as well as the boards of directors of the Boston University School of Public Health, the Livongo Health Foundation, Sharecare, Inc., GoCheck Kids, as well as a member of the Gryphon Investment Executive Advisory Board. A proponent of lifelong learning, Tramuto holds honorary doctorates from the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, Thomas Jefferson University, Lasell College and Saint Joseph’s College of Maine where he was recently named Honorary Scholar-in-Residence. Tramuto is the author of Life’s Bulldozer Moments: How Adversity Leads to Success in Life and Business.

COMPANY BRIEF Health eVillages (healthevillages.org) collaborates to advance healthcare access and improve the quality of care by providing state-of-the-art mobile health technology including medical reference and clinical decision support tools, as well as other community-focused resources, to medical and public health professionals in the most challenging clinical environments around the world. Its partners include Tramuto Foundation, Cherish Health, Promerica Health, Sharecare, Skyscape, and others.

The world is fighting a public health crisis that is impacting all countries and their citizens. The pandemic is being fought on the front lines by healthcare workers, first responders, those providing supplies and meals, transportation workers and all other essential workers. What do you say to these true leaders and heroes that are risking their lives to protect others?

While I will be forever grateful to these brave and dedicated people who are literally putting their health on the line, my first inclination is to ask them: What can I do for you? I feel very blessed that more than a few individuals and organizations – some that I never knew existed – have responded. For example, the Bangor Region YMCA, which for years has operated a large day care facility, was asked to remain in business during the pandemic to accommodate the children of emergency workers and first responders in that area of Maine. The director of the program rushed to find ways to keep her facility open while keeping the children safe and socially distanced, knowing that she would also have to find additional funding to get this done. She contacted me and asked for a grant from my nonprofit, the Tramuto Foundation, and without hesitation the Board members unanimously approved her request. With that money, the director was able to modify her facility while providing free meals throughout the day to the children. It must be so reassuring for these parents to know that every day as they return to the unknown dangers of the front lines, their children are safe, healthy and well-loved.

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My board members are compassionate, caring souls and every time I return to them with a new request for emergency funding during this pandemic, they are eager to make it happen.

How is your organization adapting the way it works to address the pandemic and the issues of racism and social injustice?

Since we all have been isolating at home, the best way for me to communicate to the outside world is through monthly podcasts and updating the websites of my two nonprofits, the Tramuto Foundation and Health eVillages, to reflect our thoughts on these important issues. However, as the pandemic has continued to ravage the country, in addition to the widespread social unrest and protests against racial inequality, I wanted to connect with more people and so I started a weekly zoom call, which I call “Inspire Chat.” Initially, I invited board members of the Tramuto Foundation, who serve as mentors to our college scholarship recipients, along with a number of our young scholars, to join the call as a way to connect and inspire each other during these troubled times. Within weeks, more students from across the country joined the call, along with representatives of our Foundation grant partner organizations. Today, we have anywhere from two to four dozen people on this weekly call, sharing deeply personal and inspiring stories as we lift each other through this uniquely strange time. It is incredibly important for us all to remain connected and share our own stories as co-workers, friends and family. Isolation can easily devolve into a deep sense of loneliness that may often trigger mental health issues. There is no doubt that the long simmering issues of racial, social and economic injustice in our society have been exacerbated as well, and I

view this time as an opportunity to examine our individual truths, share our personal stories and take the first steps toward healing together.

What do you see as a company’s responsibility to the communities it serves?

As a CEO, I operated my companies on the belief that you can, and must, serve a double bottom-line. Or, to paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, you can do well while doing good. As I stated in my first book, *Life’s Bulldozer Moments*, taking an approach that is collegial, welcoming the input and advice of others, and leading by example are prerequisites to success in life and business. Humanity and compassion for others must exist in the workplace and perhaps more importantly, beyond the workplace. I practiced this philosophy while I was a CEO and now I live it every day through my two nonprofit organizations - the Tramuto Foundation, which has provided grants to nonprofits across the country, in addition to annual scholarships for the past 19 years, and Health eVillages, an organization that provides medical professionals in some of the poorest and most remote regions of the globe with up-to-date mobile medical technology. We may not be able to change the entire world, but we are trying to make things better in the communities we serve. Servant leadership, or as I like to call it, compassionate leadership, is all about focusing on serving and using your platform to address issues outside your respective organization.

What are the keys to effective leadership during challenging and uncertain times?

As founder of several companies and a former CEO, I believe deeply in the value of compassion and compassionate leadership. Now more than any time in my lifetime, I believe the factors

that make the difference between a good and a better leader, in business and in life, are compassion and sensitivity toward others. In business, this ability helps you understand the needs of a key client, build and manage an effective management team, and deal with the best interests of all your employees and customers. Without compassion and empathy, it is impossible to put others first. Particularly during these troubling times when there are more questions than answers and many families are one paycheck away from catastrophe, people crave strong, decisive and compassionate leaders who truly hear them, empathize with their plight and create meaningful change. Compassionate leadership is not just about being kind. It’s about self-awareness – helping your associates realize their full potential, treating employees with dignity and respect, with a fierce commitment to investing in the development of each and every employee.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers during this difficult and unprecedented time?

I would tell them to remain open to the reality that as tough as these days are, things will get better. The pandemic will end, our discussions around racial, social and economic injustice will continue, and in time, the challenges we are currently confronting may bring about a more inclusive and compassionate society. It is my hope that in addition to herd immunity, we will have herd compassion and herd kindness.

The stark reality is that loss, disappointment and setbacks are a part of our lives. How we react to those losses, disappointments and setbacks will determine whether we succeed in our pursuits and, more importantly, whether we make a difference. I call these times of personal challenge our bulldozer moments, those times that force you down to your knees and all you want to do is surrender. How you react to life’s great challenges, these bulldozer moments, will be the difference between failure or success. My advice is one of reassurance and to use this unprecedented moment to ask yourself what you can do to help promote togetherness and connectedness among people. COVID-19 has escalated loneliness and social isolation to levels unimaginable just a few months ago. You have a quintessential opportunity to tackle this new chronic condition of the 21st century by reaching out to someone whether they are close to you or afar and connect deeply with that person. Reassure them that their life is meaningful and relevant. ●

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