Kenneth Abrams likes to ask job candidates what activities they enjoyed when they were kids. He listens for those that involve group cooperation, whether it’s sports or debate or band. “I played soccer, and I find that those team-based activities really enable people to do improvement work,” he says.

Improvement work is how he spends his days as senior vice president of clinical operations for 10-hospital North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, Great Neck, N.Y.: trying to cut the incidence of central-line infections, standardizing care in prenatal units and developing a protocol for dealing with sepsis. He’s not the only one, either: All of the system’s 38,000 employees, from the CEO to the janitorial staff, are expected to share the commitment of making patient care better. They’re one giant team; and identifying candidates who can contribute to that team culture is a key part of hiring, he says.

All new hires get a session with President and CEO Michael Dowling on how to be a quality advocate—it’s a standing appointment on his calendar every Monday morning. They get another orientation at their home facility, where they learn how the system’s philosophy is executed at their site. “Some of them get it the first time around,” Dowling says. “If they don’t get it eventually, we don’t keep them. You don’t just have a job here; you have a responsibility to patients.”

It’s that systemwide dedication to quality that helped North Shore-LIJ earn the 17th annual National Quality Healthcare Award, presented by the National Quality Forum in partnership with Modern Healthcare. The organization stood out from a group of 10 strong applicants, NQF President and CEO Janet Corrigan says. “They have a strong commitment to quality and impressive results,” she says. “It’s a remarkable organization.”

One of the more remarkable aspects of North Shore-LIJ is that it’s an organization at all. Before it was created in a 1997 merger, it was a disparate collection of facilities bound up into two groups: North Shore Health System and Long Island Jewish Medical Center. Its services include not only acute care, but long-term care, hospice and home care. Its service area encompasses urban, suburban and rural areas, and many of its component facilities were originally competitors.

Dowling arrived in 1995 as chief operating officer at North Shore Health System after a varied career that included stints at Blue Cross and Blue Shield, the New York State Health and Human Services Department, academic posts at Fordham and Columbia universities, and jobs in construction and plumbing. He paid his way through college as a dockworker after emigrating from Ireland. (“There is no such thing as a bad job,” he says. “Everything is a good experience and a learning experience.”)

Dowling spent much of his first decade in the organization handling issues connected to the merger. He took over as CEO in 2002. “We didn’t just want a collection of entities standing side by side,” he says. “We wanted to have consistent administrative oversight and leadership, share best practices and set the rules of the game so everyone applies the same principles and standardized metrics across the whole system.”

The merged entity operates a corporate university for its employees, the Center for Learning and Innovation, to provide continuing educa-