

From Buddy to Boss

Transitioning From “One of Us” to “One of Them”

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Yesterday you were my peer...today you report to me! Whether transitioning from staff RN to charge nurse, nurse manager to director to vice president, chief nursing officer (CNO) or beyond, expanding roles are both exciting and terri-

fying! Receiving a promotion at work is excellent recognition and presents opportunities for growth, better compensation, and further career advancement; yet moving up within an organization often presents unique challenges.

How do you, as a newly promoted nurse leader, navigate changes in work relationships and cope with added responsibilities? You are stepping into a new role that changes, not only your job duties, but also your support network. The idea that you are leaving the comfortable friendships, familiar tasks, and comradery as “one of us” to learn a new supervisory position could be divisive, potentially leading to your being viewed as “one of them.” Overcome this division with a thoughtful approach to your role transition. The purpose of this article is to outline important technical, behavioral, and leadership skills and concepts you will need to successfully transition from coworker to boss, as well as how good mentorship can affect this process.

COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Communication and visibility are 2 crucial areas that will help you gain and maintain respect from your team in your new role.

No one will argue that that this peer-to-supervisor transition will be without awkwardness while all parties sort out the new relationship dynamic. You might try saying something like this: “I understand that my moving to this role can be awkward because our relationship will have to change. My intent is not to have any strain, but rather a great working relationship. I really want to do a good job and move our unit/organization forward. What do you think I can do to accomplish that?” Role modeling an open communication style will go a long way to win their trust as their new boss.

Tips to consider for development of great communication with your team:

- Maintain an attitude of curiosity rather than superiority. No leader has all the right answers.
- Demonstrate great organizational skills: Start and end meetings on time. Prepare a clear agenda. Send meeting notes afterwards with action items for those who were not able to attend.
- Schedule 1:1 meetings with each person on the team. Even if everyone already knows you, this provides an opportunity to establish yourself in your new role and allow the team to share their thoughts on what they need from you as their new leader.

By openly acknowledging this awkwardness early, you can transition to authority figure without coming across as domineering or “bossy.” Use humor, and role model an open mind. Expect that there will be boundary testing, even from people you would not expect such behavior. Your team is trying to figure out their new relationship to you. This is part of the normal process for recalibration within team dynamics.

Some questions to consider within this communication and relationship-building domain, with recommended best practices:

- Should we remain Facebook friends? Consider establishing a professional Facebook page and invite all staff to friend you.
- Is it still okay to socialize with my former peers, now direct reports, as we used to do? Possibly, but is critical

that a new leader realizes that other staff will watch to make sure that they are being fairly treated and included in social activities.

- How might I approach the person who wanted the job that I just got? Ask that person for their support in the new role, acknowledging the same potential awkwardness you did with the rest of the staff.

Recognize that one of the greatest fears that nursing teams have when a coworker receives a promotion is that the new leader will show favoritism for friends. Do all you can to establish a reputation for being fair, because what a good leader does (or does not do) for one employee, he or she must do for all.

Maintain visibility to the team. One of the worst impressions a new boss can make is to take the position then disappear! Round on units, write notes of appreciation, and ask plenty of questions. Recognize that your recent experience as “one of us” in the team’s eyes means that you have a unique understanding of the staff perspective in the workplace. Leverage this knowledge, because it gives perspective for meaningful advocacy. Be aware that when things get tough, you might have a tendency to slide back into the skills and tasks of your former job that are more comfortable rather than hold the line in your new role.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

In order to successfully transition from the “old” to the “new,” you must consider the technical skills necessary to perform the new job as well as understand how they differ from your previous role. Sometimes the technical knowledge, skills, and abilities for the new position are not clearly defined; therefore, it is important for the new leader to advocate for him or herself and clarify in order to ensure success.

Formal job descriptions can be helpful, but often they do not give all the information necessary to perform to expectations. Here is where you, savvy nurse leader, can ask questions to clarify accountabilities before accepting a promotion. Determine whether the functions are realistic and if the appropriate supports are in place. By taking yourself through these technical questions, you can tease out what priorities your supervisor has of you in addition to other important tasks you identify for yourself.

- What is the scope of the new position? Who will report to me?
- Specifically, for which departments or projects am I responsible?
- What are my measures of success? Are there specific projects or tasks I need to tackle first before any others?
- Do I feel that I can foster a positive working relationship with the person I report to?

Orientation to the new position is also essential for clarification of expectations. Here is a partial list of questions you should ask before transitioning:

- Who will provide my orientation? It is episodic, or ongoing?
- What formal training is available? Who will orient me? Are there courses offered?

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