

AONE Leadership Laboratory Insights: *The Practice of Wise Leadership*

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This is the third in a series of six columns that will be published in Nurse Leader. Each column will focus on one nurse leadership practice, and feature challenges and strategies in the words of nurse managers. These columns are designed to encourage nurse managers to reflect on their own best practices and experiment with new approaches in leadership. The material in these columns compliments the topics covered in the Leadership Laboratory, an online, real-time, six-session seminar offered by the American Organization of Nurse Executives, and facilitated by Barbara Mackoff. The first monthly session will be this fall and focus on motivation. For more information or to register for the Leadership Laboratory, visit www.aone.org/leadershiplab. For articles, videos, inspiring quotes, and advice from seasoned nurse managers on the topic of wise leadership, visit www.aone.org/insights.

Your colleague from two coasts teaches us that the practice of wisdom—and the proof that you have learned from experience—is a change in behavior. In this column, we will explore the two key elements in the practice of wise leadership she has described: How to make sense of your experiences, and then, how to leverage those insights to create the understanding of self and others that drives growth and behavior change. Polymath playwright Johann von Goethe summarized this dual assignment when he wrote, “It is not enough to know, we must apply.”

Wise leadership is a strategy of inner work that asks you to think again. It is a hybrid of reflective practice that organizes the future with an eye to the recent past. Leaders who learn from their experiences understand that their lessons are not about shame, blame, or claims to fame; they are opportunities to engage in strategic planning.

Let’s begin with theologian James Loder’s observation that knowing is an event. Initial reflection yields one or more convincing insights. The critical question is whether these insights lead to new commitments. Did your “Aha! moment” become a distant memory? Did you “get it” and forget it? Or does your understanding yield long-term changes and enrich your leadership?

 **Reflections:** Recall a time when you faced a major disappointment, an unhappy surprise, or made a significant error in judgment. How did you explain the situation? What was your most convincing insight? Did you (or how could you) carry that learning forward? Did it result in a commitment to think or act in a different way? Next, remember a time when you resolved a problem or accomplished a goal. What were your insights about your success? Did you (or could you) carry that learning into your practice?

“I came to the ER with an ‘east coast’ style of management in terms of making split-second decisions for critical and clinical reasons. I got tremendous resistance in the beginning (because) I was perceived as abrupt, rash, disrespectful, for things that I was oblivious to. I am very, very patient care oriented; I didn’t care if I hurt your feelings if it was going to save a patient. So I had to learn how not to sacrifice that, but get the message across in a different way.”

- a west coast nurse manager



Consider five strategies for finding meaning and making sense of your missteps and successes, as well as ideas for applying those lessons in your leadership. As you read, continue to reflect on your experiences and compare your lessons with the ones that follow. Identify your best practices and learning strategies, and plan to experiment with some new actions.

COMPOSE THE EVENT

Psychologist Robert Kegan suggests that learning from experience begins in the busy intersection between an event and our reaction to it. We privately compose and frame events, and then we react to them on the basis of the meaning we have made. These moments of meaning, explains Kegan, can provide crisp insight and calls to action. On the other hand, our compositions contain more sour notes than grace notes when they are drowned

Compose the event

- Argue with your assumptions.
- Practice the rule of six.
- Use perceptual positioning.

Lead with your questions

- Pull up the roots.
- Uncover your participation.
- Ask learning and teaching questions.
- Discover déjà vu.

Don't fight the feedback

- Drill down the details.
- Mind the gap between intention and action.
- Don't get back on your horse.

Study success

- Adapt a growth mindset.
- Conduct a success audit.

Continue your education


- Practice early detection.
- Create metaphors as reminders.

out by the noise of previous assumptions and distorted by the lens of past experiences.


This was the case with Eloise D., a nurse leader who sat down with what she called “yet another irresponsible teenage mother.” As they talked, this 17-year-old patient described her birth plan, the involvement of the father, and her plan to continue school. Now Lisa understood the situation with a different meaning. “I was so wrong. She was a very mature young woman. I assumed I knew ‘her type.’ In the future, I won’t assume anything, and remember that each situation is different.”

As Eloise learned, making sense can require an argument with your beliefs and assumptions. Psychologist Robert Klein’s studies of the nature of insight describe how our core beliefs anchor the way we interpret events. We get trapped—and shut down insights—when we stick to just one story. Insight, explains Klein, is a better story (or Kegan might add, a better song).


Eloise understood that she had misread her patient by drawing upon assumptions and stories of other irresponsible young moms. As a result, she told a better story: each person is an individual. Our compositions and storytelling improve when we can explore our distortion by considering alternative points of view.

 **Reflections:** Recall an experience with a staff member, colleague, or patient where your beliefs and assumptions, drawn from previous experience, affected your judgment or dis-

torted your understanding. Next, rethink the experience using two thought experiments. What do you learn about the event and about yourself by using these strategies?

 **Experiment:** Educator Paula Underwood Spencer has written about an Iroquois thought practice called the rule of six (RO6).

It is a strategy to keep biases in check and prevent you from locking into one way of making sense. Here’s the drill: For every experience, try to come up with six plausible explanations. One student of management who began using RO6 reported, “It really helped me learn about how my staff might be seeing things differently than I do.”

 **Experiment:** Anthropologist Gregory Bateson and neurolinguistic programmers John Grinder and Judith DeLozier pioneered the strategy of perceptual positioning. This requires reconstructing events from three distinct vantage points. The first position is the way you think and feel based on how you view the situation. The second position is a stance of reversibility, of seeing, hearing, and feeling the situation as if you were the other person or people involved. The third position is a fly-on-the-wall view. What would you see, think, and/or feel if you were an uninvolved person?

LEAD WITH QUESTIONS

The wisdom of experience is grounded in the art of the questions you ask. Let’s review your bicoastal colleague’s leadership lesson above by pulling up the

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