Succession Planning:
Using Simulation to Develop Nurse Leaders for the Future

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BACKGROUND

One of the biggest shortages in healthcare middle management is that of the registered nurse (RN),[1] whose average age in the United States is 47.[2] With increasing chief nursing officer (CNO) turnover, recruitment into these leadership positions is critical to meeting the leadership and management needs of the future. Succession planning is imperative, and many organizations have embedded it into their strategic plans. Those individuals who manifest leadership skills while managing patients or staff, who are not yet in formal leadership roles, are identified as aspiring or emerging nurse leaders. Many managers were promoted into leadership positions because they were competent staff nurses and clinicians.

Oftentimes, nurses are placed in management positions without proper training, and they lack the necessary skills to perform effectively in a management role, which is one reason turnover occurs.[3]

Education programs such as Nurse Manager Fellowship and Emerging Nurse Leader Institute through the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE), and the Foundation for Leadership Excellence through the Association of California Nurse Leaders (ACNL) are examples of educational opportunities for aspiring leaders. These programs have comprehensive modules around such necessary topics as human resources, finance, communication, and quality, and are conducted over a 3- to 5-day period.

Table 1. Top 5 Soft Skills Selected by All Respondents and Subgroups*

	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice	Fourth Choice	Fifth Choice
All respondents	Integrity	Communicative	Team building	Listening	Problem Solving
CNO and VP patient services	Team building	Communicative	Integrity	Problem solving	Negotiating
Deans and professors, associate / assistant	Communicative	Integrity	Trustworthy	Work ethic	Problem solving
Directors and managers	Adaptability	Communicative	Integrity	Listening	Team building
Staff nurses	Communicative	Team building	Adaptability	Integrity	Trustworthy

*Note: All groups selected communicative and integrity as 2 of their top 5 skills, coinciding with the identification by Robles[9] that communication and integrity are 2 of the 10 top skills executives are seeking in leaders and employees. (C. Delucas, unpublished data)

Another method of educating emerging and current leaders is through simulation. Simulation has been utilized in healthcare for the past 20 years (high-fidelity, standardized patients, task trainers) for students and staff. Although many organizations own high-fidelity simulators and have simulation centers, their curricula typically do not include leadership development.

Simulating situations in a realistic-looking environment can be effective in building leadership skills. Creating an environment that allows staff to practice their newly acquired skills in a safe environment without judgment will not only prepare them for the real-life experiences but also to identify early on whether the move to a leadership position is warranted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As healthcare continues to evolve, it is imperative that leaders develop skills that will enhance their abilities to face the competitive environment today and in the future. Drawing on interpersonal skills, innovation, values, and experience are critical to addressing the challenges of today's healthcare arena.[4–6] The ability to work deftly across disciplines to provide the highest quality of safe, effective care requires nurse leaders to have well-honed *soft skills* (e.g., communication, relationship building, professionalism). Embodied in the AONE's competencies are *hard skills* (e.g., finance, marketing, strategic planning) and also soft skills, plus innovation, technology, and the need to address succession planning.[7]

In a review of the literature, (C. Delucas, unpublished data) found that although the military and aviation industries have led many others to recognize that nontechnical leadership skills contribute to safety and in training on human factors, healthcare and nursing have lagged behind. Furthermore, it is well known that a significant number of nurses are of the baby boomer generation. This large population of nurses on the brink of retirement renders succession planning critical to the continued success of healthcare organizations. However, more than two-thirds of chief nurse executives (CNEs) indicated that they have no plans for leadership development in succession planning.[8]

There is an abundance of discussion in the literature regarding leadership and its impact on employees and the success of an organization. An increase in dialogue regarding communication and team building has ensued over the last decade. Robles[9] identified the top 10 soft skills that business executives in a variety of industries stated were critical to successful leadership. Communication and integrity far exceeded the others in importance, followed by courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. Research does not negate the importance of hard skills but corroborates that soft skills are equally as important and should be considered complementary (C. Delucas, unpublished data).

Identifying the top 5 soft skills that nurse leaders considered to be essential for successful leadership was accomplished via 2 survey modalities: a convenience sample during the AONE 2013 annual conference and an electronic version of the same survey utilizing SurveyMonkey®(C. Delucas, unpublished data). One hundred respondents identified communication and integrity as 2 of their top 5 soft skills, coinciding with Robles' business executives report.[9] The other 3 top skills were team building, listening, and problem solving. The top 5 varied by subgroups of the total respondents (*Table 1*).

After participating in leadership simulations, (C. Delucas, unpublished data) queried participants as to their reactions. Paraphrased comments include, "Having never been in a live simulation, it was very good, it forces you think quickly and about being in the situation." "Debriefing, forming and organizational discussion allowed time to step back and check