

# Leading With Grace: *Building an Accountable Team*

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**H**ealthcare leaders are facing increasing challenges as the healthcare arena changes. Across the United States, healthcare organizations struggle to prepare for upcoming and ongoing healthcare reform measures that will force incredible change at all levels of healthcare delivery.<sup>1</sup> In order to facilitate change of such magnitude, leaders have to build accountable teams that can embrace change and sustain high-quality healthcare for our patients. All too often leaders struggle with how to balance multiple, and sometimes conflicting, priorities. Now, more than ever, leaders must learn to balance grace with accountability to build highly reliable healthcare organizations that will create solutions to the current state of affairs, which includes fragmented and disjointed healthcare delivery.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, the idea of leading with grace to build an accountable team is explored with shared stories to emphasize take-away strategies for new and experienced nurse leaders who can then mentor others as they strengthen their skill set and team.

## **BACKGROUND**

Many nurse leaders, the author included, began their first nurse leadership position because they were a good nurse. Being a good nurse, or even a great nurse, may be a precursor of a good or great leader, but not necessarily. Without the correct mentoring, support, and ongoing education these good, or great, nurses will be set up for possible failure as leaders.<sup>3</sup> There are a multitude of programs, books, seminars, conferences, theories, and strategies available to the nurse leader, but none of these can take the place of a good mentor. The author has been blessed to have many mentors in her career and has learned that there are times when a leader needs a mentor, times when a leader is the mentor, and times when the leader is both mentor and mentee.



In a life before nursing, the author was an assistant manager for a popular fast food chain. As a young adult and new leader, the author lacked life experience but was in a position of complete authority for the restaurant. The district manager became a mentor and explained that as leaders, we are paid to make decisions. The mentor explained that regardless of the outcome of the leader's decisions, or actions, he would support her publicly. If there was a situation in which he would have done things differently, or wished she had done things differently, they would have that conversation in private. His role was to ensure she had the information and knowledge to make good choices, and her role was to demonstrate behaviors and actions to build his confidence and trust in her. The

author has never forgotten the lesson or the mentorship and has taken this lesson forward in every leadership position since that time.

## GRACE

Grace can have different meanings for different individuals. For the purposes of this article and discussion, grace is the treatment given to others, especially those who have made a mistake or done other than what was expected. It is entirely possible to be kind and maintain an individual's dignity while addressing a behavior or decision and holding said individual accountable.<sup>4</sup> In addition, grace can include giving others the benefit of the doubt, seeking first to understand, and ensuring due diligence in fact finding before jumping to a conclusion. An easy mistake of new leaders is to take what they know, or have been told, and draw a conclusion or take action. Too often when a leader acts before fact gathering, they must backtrack and undo any damage that may have been caused.

The idea of grace may seem simple, but as a leader, it may be one of the toughest attributes to maintain. The nurse leader's day does not begin and end in the same fashion as frontline staff. The nurse leader is responsible 24/7, and can easily work 60 hours in a week, and then go home and catch up on e-mails or respond to employee calls or texts. If the leader does not take time for themselves, turn work off, they risk disenchantment. They can become short-tempered and determine that grace is undeserved by their reports. It is at these times that grace is most important, for the leader as well as their reports.

Whether you are a new or seasoned leader, whether you are a supervisor, manager, director, or chief nursing officer, you will need an accountable team to build the infrastructure necessary to meet the ever-changing needs of the current healthcare environment. As you build your team and lead with grace, you too will need to receive grace. We are humans and as such are imperfect, which is why grace is so important for us and for our team.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability is a term that we hear in our daily work, but what does it really mean? An individual does not have to go far in the business section of the local bookstore to find books on accountability. We live in an era where information is readily available, but there is no magic wand or potion to build accountability in the workplace. Buying a book may not be sufficient. Activities such as reading a book, attending a conference, or taking a class are a good start, but without a lot of hard work from all the parties involved, accountability will remain an elusive concept.

Many organizations have adopted the principles of a just culture. When implementing just culture, leaders ensure that systems are in place to set up individuals for success, that employees have received training and education to ensure competency, and that what is expected to occur is known to everyone on the team. In a just culture, if something untoward such as an error occurs, an investigation ensues to deter-

mine the factors involved.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, some have taken just culture as a means of not holding individuals accountable, because it is convenient to blame external or systemic causes. So a just culture is 1 component to building an accountable team, but more is needed.

Over the past few years, the author has used *The OZ Principle* as a teaching strategy for leadership development. The book focuses on individual and organizational accountability and uses "See It, Own It, Solve It, Do It" as the behaviors, or actions, necessary for individuals to remain "above the line." These behaviors are geared to instill accountability by placing the responsibility on the individual to see what needs to be done or fixed to own what they have seen, to find a solution and implement the solution.<sup>6</sup>

The accountability described within *The OZ Principle* is essential to improving patient safety, patient outcomes, patient satisfaction, employee engagement, financial sustainability, and successfully managing all of the other priorities faced by today's healthcare leader.

The author first facilitated discussions about the *OZ Principle* with her nurse managers, including regular follow-up discussions around how the lessons were applied. Today those nurse managers are passing on what they have learned to their nurse supervisors so that the cycle of learning and accountability continues. The nurse leaders have also shared these concepts with their teams to begin to connect the dots between individual choices, action or inaction, and patient care experiences.

## LEADING WITH GRACE

As nurse leaders, we can regularly fluctuate between novice to expert and will routinely encounter situations not previously experienced. One method that leaders can use to manage these transitions is to ensure that there are experts on the team that fill in any gaps. Leveraging the strengths of each team member allows everyone to grow and the team to succeed.

To lead with grace, we also need to be led with grace, to ensure the same grace provided to others. An example is when the author went through an especially trying time, when reliance on the motto, "God first, family second, everything else after that," particularly applied. The author was struggling to find balance between managing conflicting priorities at work, priorities at home, and finishing her graduate course work. The author fell victim to her own negative thoughts and actions until one of her mentees intervened as a mentor. This leader helped the author to see all the good that had been achieved, and to understand that she needed a break to regain her perspective and momentum. This is great advice if any leader wants to be able to consistently lead with grace.

There are many strategies that the nurse leader can use to build an accountable team while leading with grace and there is no one right approach. One strategy that many good nurse leaders employ is that of storytelling. Using stories to illustrate the lesson can be very powerful and is a skill worth sharpening.

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