

Build High-Performing Military Nurse Leaders Through Coaching, Sponsorship, and Engagement

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The healthcare environment is constantly evolving, and with economic pressures to reduce costs, it is changing at a rapid rate. The Army War College depicts this environment as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.¹ Strategic nurse leaders must be able to embrace the rapidly changing environment, be visionary,

innovative, adaptive, and learn effective and efficient strategies to minimize risk and maximize opportunities. The Institute of Medicine's Future of Nursing 2010 reported the need for strong transformational nurse leaders across the country who will lead system-wide campaigns of health-care transformation.²

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of focused efforts in building high-performing leaders who will lead the way to affordable, high-quality, safe, and patient-centered healthcare. Coaching, mentorship, sponsorship, and experience are necessary components for developing future adaptive high-performing leaders.

FACING THE FUTURE

Nationwide, healthcare in both the military and civilian environments is changing. The Affordable Care Act, as well as the national focus on decreasing healthcare costs, is forcing corporate healthcare agencies to create new innovative strategies to how healthcare is delivered. The military health system is no exception, with a focus of minimizing the health costs that is the result of the decrease of the Department of Defense budget by 3.9 billion dollars.³ Because of this reality, strategic leaders must be able to embrace these rapidly changing environments, be visionary, innovative, adaptive, and learn effective and efficient strategies. The Army War College uses the acronym VUCA, representing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, to describe an increasingly unstable and rapidly changing environment.¹ The past year's government shutdown, implementation of the Affordable Care Act, and continued downsizing of the military force has revealed that the military healthcare is also a VUCA environment.

General Raymond Odierno, in his address to the American Uniformed Services Association, stated that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to the need to develop adaptive and agile leaders and organizations.⁴ There must be more focus on the team. Future strategic leaders must be solid risk-takers who embrace innovation and are skilled in influencing people.⁴ The future VUCA environment makes it imperative that leaders possess the highest caliber competencies and leadership character. This VUCA environment reaches past just the war-time scenario and extends into military and civilian healthcare settings as the nation's focus is to transform from the traditional healthcare system to a system of health. The Army Surgeon General's initiative to change the focus of military healthcare to a System for Health requires all healthcare leaders to think differently about how care is provided. The concept of a "System for Health" is about living a healthier life through healthy eating, being active, and sleep. These are the tenants of the Army Medical Department's (AMEDD) performance triad.⁵ The innovative methods of transforming care to focus on improving the total health of all military members requires leaders to be adaptive and innovative change agents.

In the healthcare environment, the strongest strategic nurse leaders must inspire people to want to follow them, not because of their rank or title, but because of their demonstrated leadership character. These high-performing leaders, both civilian and military, will have the ability to navigate through the VUCA environment while maintaining a healthy atmosphere for the organization.

The Army is well known for its leadership education programs and the deliberate leader development of its Soldiers. Accordingly, the Army Nurse Corps (ANC) reflects

the larger Army's strategic initiatives in the area of continued leader development. It is important for any high-performing organization to continue to reassess its leader development needs so it will be capable of adapting and transforming in response to constant change.

THE MILLENNIALS

The older Millennials (referred to as the Y2K generation) are now in their late twenties, which means they are the novice workforce and junior leaders. This is a generation of well-educated, tech-savvy multitaskers. In the past, the nurse leader chain of command was one that was very rigid and structured. Frontline staff nurses were required to navigate through several leadership layers before connecting to the chief nurse. Today's generation, with LinkedIn, Facebook, and other social and professional media sites, have instant communication that removes the historical layers of leadership that represented barriers to communication in the past. Data are readily available, undoubtedly supporting evidence-based decision making and dramatically decreasing the time needed to make decisions.⁶ However, one needs to carefully scrutinize information found through social media sites because it may not be reliable or accurate. This digital world also creates the need for a new kind of senior executive leader who must also be able to communicate with the millennial and future workforces in their space. They must learn to access data easily to make informed decisions quicker. Innovation does not occur in a silo organizational structure. Senior leaders must promote an environment of integrated creativity and innovation, which means bridging the gaps through open collaborative mechanisms and technology.

COMPETENCIES NEEDED:

It is critical that nurse leaders are groomed from the very early stages of their professional career all the way through to the strategic levels. High-performing and effective leaders are adaptive, agile, transformational, innovative, great communicators, strategic thinkers, visionary, evidenced-based decision-makers, and authentic.^{2,7,8} They must understand the complexity of the business enterprise of healthcare, such as finance, economics, market forces, and legal and regulatory frameworks, and be skilled at synergizing systems.^{6,9} It is not sufficient for nursing leaders to drive quality healthcare only in the nursing lane. They must be full partners in changing healthcare policy and processes across the entire spectrum of healthcare, and be respected decision-makers in C-suite strategic planning meetings. The C-suite is a term used when speaking about the most senior of executives, typically with titles that begin with the word "chief" such as chief nursing executive or chief executive officer.⁹ To be effective and respected as a strategic leader outside the nursing realm, one must be skilled in team building, vertical and horizontal communication, collaboration, innovation design, and quality improvement. To become this kind of strategic leader, you must be able to identify your skill, competencies, talent, and character gaps, and be willing to reach out for guidance and continuing education. Learning never ends.

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