

Leadership Skills: *New Nurse to Nurse Executive*

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Nursing careers are plentiful! Today's nurses have the ability to move through hospital systems, outpatient surgery centers and clinics, educational systems, government health care, community health settings, and multiple advanced practice nursing specialties. Leadership opportunities are also abundant with the ever-changing health care system. Regardless of the chosen path, leadership skills remain essential to your success. From novice to expert, mentorship is vital. Leadership role models remain pivotal to future success as a nursing leader. Identifying potential leaders, even amongst novice nurses, guide gifted individuals to graduate education and beyond. As well, identification and guidance of individuals provide strong motivation to gain new knowledge and glean skills consistent with strong nursing leadership.

Each of us has a story that informs and inspired how leadership evidenced itself early in our nursing careers. Although the career paths differ, basic leadership skills remain the same. Two vignettes illustrate how mentorship and leadership skills translate to guide and direct nursing careers to high level successful executive positions.

VIGNETTE #1: DR. PLAYER

In reflection of a nursing career that seemed to have more turns than straight trajectories, it was the mentorship and the influence of numerous nurse leaders and colleagues that ultimately shaped my career. I am most thankful the profession allowed a less traditional path to be carved out and grateful those guiding me along the way had the vision and wisdom to see the big picture, even during the times it was not always evident to me.

The literature is robust with articles on the importance of mentorship for the new nurse, but over 25 years ago, it was

not the case. It was 8 years into my professional career before mentors stepped in to help guide me forward. I wish there was a strategic method for choosing my mentors, but I must admit it was a case where 2 more experienced nurses seemed to adopt me. Mentors helped point my compass during critical times in my career in very purposeful directions. In every instance, the mentors offered a shift in thinking relative to seizing and planning my future versus allowing my career path to fall to chance.

Early Years

While working in a hospital setting a few years out of my baccalaureate program, I found myself passionate about psychiatric nursing, so the thought of graduate school became a natural choice, continuing on to earn my doctoral degree. Armed with a strong work ethic and the advanced education, the doors to management opened. As a director over a psychiatric intake center, employee assistance program, and crisis management

team, the pace was hectic, carrying a beeper 24/7. Yet, I embraced the higher level responsibility and leadership.

It was also a time in my career I learned a valuable lesson that would serve me well much later. As privacy breaches occur, a fax with a male colleague's salary came into the main hospital fax machine, so as the department manager, the secretary brought it to my attention. The colleague was not a licensed professional, had no direct reports, no beeper to be concerned with, and a fraction of the responsibility, but was earning a higher salary. I was innocent enough to be completely puzzled by the reality of the news, but also smart enough to be furious at the perceived injustice. The incident opened my eyes and forced my hand as to "what was I going to do about it." Having no mentor at the time to guide me, would I hold the news inside and allow the inequity to churn away, or talk to my boss about being deserving of a raise? Ironically, I was not upset with my colleague for negotiating a higher salary for his 9-to-5 pm job, but more kicking myself for being the weaker negotiator. Prorating my salary in those days, with nighttime and weekend emergency calls, no doubt came out to pennies on the hour, but I enjoyed it tremendously!

Needless to say, I set up an appointment with my boss, who was the chief executive officer (CEO). I proceeded to give a well-rehearsed presentation of my responsibilities, leading up to the request for more money (never mentioning the knowledge of my discovery). He gave me assurance an adjustment would be in order with my next evaluation, which was due in 3 months. However, my evaluation came and went, earning an excellent score, yet I was told after a competitive analysis "my pay was appropriate for the role," so aside from the yearly raise, there would be no significant adjustment. After the shock wore off, I realized it was time to do my own competitive analysis to see what my worth really was in the market. Within 4 weeks, I had 3 job offers to consider and chose to take the largest leap, which meant moving into an academic role. This particular lesson in my career was powerful in that it turned my hospital-based nursing trajectory on a dime and opened a much wider door for what was to come. In reflection, it was a gift not to receive a salary adjustment as it was the stimulus to taking a risk and making a career change. Having to learn early on the power of asking for one's worth and risking change was a great dress rehearsal for what was to come later. Had the conversation produced an additional adjustment of even a few thousand dollars, I was naive enough to have been thrilled. It was a momentary conversation that had a huge impact on the outcome of my career.

Hospital to Academia

The incident was enough to open my eyes to making change and, consequently, shift from hospital-based nursing to academics. My new position called for a dual reporting relationship to both the nursing dean as well as a business college dean. Interestingly enough, my prior hospital role also had a dual reporting structure to the chief nursing officer and CEO, so it was comfortable. However, as difficult as this structure is to imagine today in academics, in the early years of nontraditional program offerings, it was in fact the organi-

zational structure. One college had oversight of the faculty and curriculum while the other college managed the operations. Among my nursing colleagues, this structure placed me at a disadvantage because in their eyes, it politically put me in more of a "stepchild" position. The position could do the work, but not carry an equal voice in voting at the nursing table, whereas the opposite reaction held true with my business colleagues. The dichotomy of how the 2 groups received, not only myself, but also the innovation of the structure made an impact on my subsequent career choices. Being new to the academic environment, it sent a message of how business professionals could accept change and innovation more rapidly and less critically than the nursing profession, which in turn appeared seeped in a tradition that inhibited change and created tunnel vision. The reflection sounds a bit harsh because today, nursing has grown leaps and bounds in innovation and rapid change out of necessity, but the changes have come over time. The dynamics and treatment by my own nursing colleagues during these years are the sad stereotypes many new graduates ultimately leave the profession over. However, the silver lining is in how it also highlights the power of mentorship.

Two nursing adjunct faculty teaching at the college in the evenings held state-level leadership positions and had a bird's eye view for witnessing the interesting dynamic of what was going on. They stepped in to surround and support me with opportunities for professional growth and development. In their words, "they saw a diamond in the rough," who had potential and could flourish if given a chance. Over the next 2 years, the program I had been hired to develop had tremendous success, but difficult choices followed. The nursing college insisted the program to be brought back under the fold entirely of their authority. This structure forced a decision to either continue my role working within the nursing college, or stay with the business college and assume a chair position over professional studies. My passion and heart wanted to follow nursing, but the everyday politics lead me to stay with my business colleagues and accept the promotion. The stereotypical dynamics of dysfunctional teams made the decision easy, and once again, I took the larger of the career leaps into business. The move caused me concern this decision would distance and risk my future nursing career. Did I just cut off all my contacts and relationships in nursing? Thankfully, my mentors had a way of reframing the career move by saying it was an opportunity to build bridges with nursing from a distance and was just what needed to happen.

Executive Roles

At this same time, my 2 mentors were encouraging further leadership development such as running for president of the state nurses association and challenging me to apply for a Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Nurse Executive Fellowship. Working in a business college, I felt sure my RWJ Fellowship application would not fit the executive nurse profile, but fortunately, I was wrong. My mentors could see so clearly what I could not in those years. The RWJ Fellowship embraced my work diversity and felt nursing would be positively impacted

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