



Becoming a nurse faculty leader: Taking risks by doing the right thing

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 March 2013

Revised 30 September 2013

Accepted 5 December 2013

Keywords:

Nurse faculty leaders

Leadership

Risk taking

Academic leadership

Professional responsibility

Nursing vision

Moral courage

ABSTRACT

Risk taking is a key aspect of academic leadership essential to meeting the challenges and opportunities in higher education. What are the practices of risk taking in nurse faculty leaders? This interpretive phenomenological study examines the experience and meaning of risk taking among nurse leaders. The theme of doing the right thing is brought forth through in-depth hermeneutic analysis of 14 individual interviews and two focus group narratives. The practice of doing the right thing is propelled and captured by leaders through a sense of professional responsibility, visioning the future, and being true to self and follow one's core values. This study develops an evidence base for incorporating ways of doing the right thing in leadership development activities at a time when there is tremendous need for highly effective leaders in academic settings. Examining the practices of doing the right thing as a part of leadership development lays a foundation for building the next generation of nursing leaders prepared to navigate the ever-changing and complex academic and health care environments.

Cite this article: Horton-Deutsch, S., Pardue, K., Young, P. K., Morales, M. L., Halstead, J., & Pearsall, C. (2014, APRIL). Becoming a nurse faculty leader: Taking risks by doing the right thing. *Nursing Outlook*, 62(2), 89-96. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2013.12.003>.

Being a leader willing to take well-calculated risks has been identified as a key practice of leadership in recent qualitative studies originating from a group project of the National League for Nursing/Johnson & Johnson Faculty Leadership and Mentoring Program (Pearsall et al, 2014; Young, Pearsall, Stiles, Nelson, & Horton-

Deutsch, 2011; Young, 2009). These studies were informed by earlier works aimed to strengthen and widen our understanding of leadership (Grossman & Valiga, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; O'Neil & Morjikian, 2003; Reardon, 2007). In what ways do nurse faculty leaders take risks? Early studies

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2013.12.003>

illuminated nurse faculty leaders take risks by trying something new with students through advocacy and by speaking up (Young et al., 2011) as well as by doing one's homework to minimize risk (Pearsall et al., 2014). Similarly, Adelman-Mullally et al. (2013) found that clinical nurse educators lead by role modeling prudent risk taking for students.

The purpose of this study was to further reveal the meaning of taking risks among nurse faculty leaders in classroom, clinical, and collegial contexts of academic institutions often extending into health care settings and other community partnerships. The intention of this qualitative research is to ascertain practical know-how and processes used by nurse faculty leaders who are taking risks. This research further contributes to the limited literature explicating the nuances of risk taking by reporting on how nurse faculty leaders take risks in order to "do the right thing."

Design and Method

This interpretive phenomenological study of the experiences of becoming a nurse faculty leader was approved for human subjects research at Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN. Twenty-four attendees at the National League for Nursing Leadership Conference in 2008 provided consent for the hermeneutical analysis of their recorded narratives of becoming a leader. During the initial data analysis, taking risks, being thrust into leadership, and facing challenges were three common, shared experiences of becoming a leader explicated by Young et al. (2011). Each of these leadership experiences was analyzed further to reveal the nuances of the particular experience. How faculty leaders who are thrust into leadership advance reform was reported by Stiles, Pardue, Young, and Morales (2011) and how they face challenges through persevering, reflecting, and relating in new ways was reported by Horton-Deutsch, Young, and Nelson (2010). Taking risks was subsequently explored in depth through narrative data obtained in late 2010 during reinterviews and focus group discussions. This article reports findings on the theme "doing the right thing" elucidated from the hermeneutical analysis of this subset of narratives focusing on the practice of risk taking by 21 nurse faculty leaders, whereas Pearsall et al. (2014) report findings illuminating the risk taking theme "doing your homework."

The research method for the root study is reported in detail elsewhere (Young et al., 2011), as is the method of the current study focusing on the phenomenon of taking risks (Pearsall et al., 2014). In brief, in the current study, six participants whose first narrative made direct reference to taking risks were reinterviewed, and respondents were asked to describe in detail a specific situation in which they took a risk. In addition, the research team interviewed each other in two small focus groups and analyzed their experiences

of taking risks and its meaning to their leadership development.

The authors worked as a research team in the analysis of the data, writing interpretations of the participant narratives, and meeting by telephone conference call every 2 weeks to discuss the themes identified in the written interpretations. Working as a team, the authors challenged unwarranted interpretations, returning to the texts when disagreement arose. The process of interpretation was cyclical, with each round being informed by the lens of understanding generated by previous writing and dialogue until a rich, multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon was obtained. The final cycle of interpretation incorporated the extant literature to challenge, extend, or overcome the team's explication of the data. The process of working as a team validated the findings and contributed to the rigor of the study. The theme of taking risks by doing the right thing is explicated here with exemplars of deidentified participant narratives to allow readers to determine if the findings resonate with their experiences and they can actualize them in their work. Resonance and actualization are other expressions of rigor in interpretive phenomenological research (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006).

Findings

In this study, nursing faculty shared stories of how being a leader often required taking a risk by acting in a particular way. This action was described as "doing the right" or "doing the difficult" thing. For some, taking a risk and doing the right thing came from a sense of responsibility to their role or a professional goal. Participants shared stories of responding in a way they believed was expected of them given they held a certain title within the academy or as a professional aspiration for their career. For others, knowing how to respond was more consciously developed through following a vision they had of their preferred nursing education future. Finally, being true to a core self and following one's values and moral code was the third way participants articulated doing the right thing. This section illuminates these three themes and describes how nurse faculty leaders saw themselves taking risks and doing the right thing by being responsible to their role and professional aspirations, out of enacting a vision for nursing, and in being true to a core self that included following one's values and moral code.

Doing the Right Thing out of a Sense of Responsibility

Many of the stories related by nurse faculty leaders revealed the phenomenon of doing the right thing as emanating from a sense of responsibility to the role or as an action congruent with professional goals. Tippy, a seasoned clinical nurse educator, recounted her experience of assuming a director position for a prelicensure nursing program. Tippy described the

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