

Preparation of Nurse Leaders in the 21st Century Workplace

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The Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, “To Err is Human,”¹ alerted health care providers and consumers to the threats to patient safety and the need for what is known as transformational leadership in management of health care organizations. As the internal and external environment of current health care continues to be challenged by the attempt to create more reliable organizations, nurse leaders need to be prepared with skills for the successful implementation of complex initiatives and innovative approaches to facilitate the safest health care possible.

The restructuring mania of health care settings of the 1980s and 1990s was driven by the need to save money, with organizations emphasizing efficiency over patient safety. A common action that took place in the restructuring was the elimination of nurse manager positions and the perceived reduction in power of chief nurse executives.² The nursing managers who remained employed in

most health care systems were challenged with the overwhelming responsibility and accountability of the staff and patients on many units. Nurse leadership was consumed with managing large operations to their maximum fiscal efficiency, and the priority to create a culture of patient safety within the setting was nonexistent.

Creating work environments in which health care is de-

livered in a safe manner requires a new type of nursing leader, one who can transform the environment and the culture of a health care organization. This is the concept identified as transformational leadership. With relation to this concept, Burns³ concluded that a successful leader is able to see, act on, and satisfy followers' values and motivations in addition to his or her own.⁴

Transformational leaders commit to establishing and maintaining a relationship with their employees via two-way communication and the exchange of information and ideas. During the exchange, a transformational leader seeks to understand the employee's values and motivations and work toward developing commonly held goals that benefit the organization.

Research has revealed five common management practices associated with successful implementation of change initiatives and patient safety⁴:

- Balancing the tension between production efficiency and reliability (safety)
- Creating and sustaining trust throughout the organization
- Actively managing the process of change
- Involving workers in decision-making pertaining to work design and work flow
- Using knowledge management practices to establish the organization as a "learning organization"

Transformational nursing leaders who function with an awareness of these management practices achieve a collective goal and set the stage for creating a culture of patient safety in a complex environment. The goal of safe patient care can become a reality under a transformational leader. The purpose of our article is to identify the characteristics of a transformational nursing leader and describe how to prepare nurses to become leaders who are well versed in the evidence and clearly understand the challenges of creating a culture of patient safety.

BASIC EDUCATIONAL PREPARATION OF A TRANSFORMATIONAL NURSING LEADER

Since the 1950s, the nursing profession has been debating the basic educational preparation for registered nurses. In 1965, the American Nurses Association⁵ first recommended that the baccalaureate degree be the minimal educational level for professional nurses. Although the recommendation was never implemented on a national basis, baccalaureate nursing programs have grown over the years, with 43% of nurses holding bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) degrees in 2004.⁶ Baccalaureate education prepares nurses in the skills of critical thinking, leadership, case management, and health promotion across a wide spectrum of health care settings. The additional education that BSN-prepared nurses receive in nursing research, management, and the humanities produces a better understanding of the cultural, political, economic, and social issues that affect patient care and health care delivery.

In order to be able to practice transformational nursing, a registered nurse needs, at a minimum, the sound founda-

tion that a baccalaureate education provides. Graduates of liberal education collegiate programs demonstrate strong skills in communication,⁷ assessment, cultural sensitivity, resourcefulness and scientific reasoning. Master's degrees in nursing would be the ideal educational background to prepare a nurse for the complexity of the transformational management role. The advanced degree prepares a nurse to provide direction and leadership as the depth and breadth of scientific knowledge expands. The research experience gained at the master's level of education also prepares a nursing leader to evaluate and utilize evidence-based nursing practice when designing organizational changes in collaboration with nursing staff and interdisciplinary groups.

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING SKILLS

People are the most important resource of an organization, and transformational leaders recognize that building relationships among employees and departments is an essential component in transforming a work environment. Participation is an effective organizational strategy that assists organizations to develop the information needed to do their business.⁸ When multiple employees actively participate in an open environment to interpret data, multiple potential explanations, interpretations, and outcomes can emerge instead of the limited options of senior leadership. The diversity of options that involved employees can bring to the workplace when they work as group to design future scenarios creates an ownership that links them to the organization. Ownership of organizational plans can result in an energy level that leads to a commitment by employees and groups to organizational goals of transformation.

Transformational nursing leaders are proficient in team-building skills. By bringing more people into the decision-making process, an organization can work toward positive patient outcomes. For teams to function effectively, the leader is responsible to organize systematic educational activities for team members addressing interactive planning, systems thinking, reengineering, and quality improvement activities.⁹ Work teams that are prepared through grounded and organized educational activities are prepared to shift into new paradigms and able to accept the responsibilities of implementing changes.

MANAGING THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

Three levels of reactions to change have been identified: people champion the change, take a wait-and-see approach, or refuse to participate in the change.⁹ Transformational leaders must have management skills to handle the employees who refuse to participate. Dealing with difficult people and situations is a reality in changing environments, and articulate communication and management skills are needed to assist the employees to join the change process or to consider alternative employment.

A transformational leader will use a multitude of tools, such as conflict resolution, interactive conversations, leading change, and mentoring employees responsible for imple-

menting the change, to influence groups of employees to work toward a shared outcome. Traditional bureaucratic management methods must be replaced with participative management skills that support risk-taking, tolerate failure, and delegate decision-making to the point of service. Control is an illusion in the ever-changing health care environment. Transformational leaders are aware that decisions made by empowered employees performing essential tasks will achieve organizational goals.

Interdisciplinary teams are another essential element of organizations that will survive the external influences of the health care system. Transformational leaders will be required to represent nursing departments in the interdisciplinary delivery of patient care to achieve efficient and effective patient outcomes. Nursing education, basic and advanced, provides future nursing leaders with the holistic and humanistic knowledge and expertise that is needed to work with ancillary and support departments within an organization.

EVIDENCE-BASED NURSING PRACTICE AND NURSING MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

The IOM's 2000 report¹ said, "Evidence-based practice is the integration of best research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values." Nursing care based on best evidence assists an organization to deliver effective and efficient nursing care. Although evidence-based nursing practice is a challenge for nursing leaders because of the gap between research and practice, a transformational leader will be knowledgeable in the development and evaluation of research-based clinical information systems to be used within an organization. Clinically useful information, such as practice guidelines developed by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research and specialty associations, can be accessed on the Internet,¹⁰ and a transformational leader must learn to tap into the resources of the Web to access up to date clinical information.

Transformational leaders must also contribute to clinical databases by participating in research projects with nursing and medical researchers. A strong knowledge base in research is required of a transformational leader so that the research performed in his or her organization moves in an orderly and systemic fashion. Master's-prepared nurses have participated in the research process and can contribute to the body of nursing knowledge while validating the outcomes of the changes that occur.

Nursing managers can no longer participate in restructuring plans that are not based on research findings. Restructuring of patient care delivery systems of the past was influenced by the financial pressures of reduced payments from federal and state government health plans and insurance health plans. A transformational leader will review nursing and organizational literature to avoid making the

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mistakes of the past when transforming a health care entity. Measurement of the clinical outcomes following a reorganization assists a nursing leader in communicating about the impact on patients, employees, and the organization.

CULTURE: UNDERSTANDING SHARED VALUES

All organizations develop a set of shared values—their culture. Health care organizations also have their own shared values, also known as "the way things are done around here." The culture of an organization is often learned and shared through its stories. One of the most common types of stories is about changes attempted in the past that failed. Transformational leaders need skills to ascertain the beliefs, values and systems of their organization before attempting to propose new solutions to the numerous issues faced by the employees and patients. Awareness of the values of an organization, the attitudes of the employees, executive and medical leadership, and increased communication skills can enhance the opportunity for collaborative and collegial program planning.

Understanding the culture of a health care setting requires assessment skills learned by the transformational leader in an educational setting. Experience at the collegiate level can expose future nurses to cultural diversity and experiences. Awareness of ethnocentrism can help individuals challenge their beliefs and attitudes and open up to a greater understanding of how multiple cultural factors influence the delivery of health care.

CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Graduation from nursing school is just the beginning of lifelong learning that is essential to practice nursing competently and safely in the 21st century. Transformational nursing leaders are faced with health care literature that is profuse, specialized, and difficult to keep up with. The communication explosion of the World Wide Web allows anyone who can access a computer to learn about the latest research and findings. The management behaviors of the past are being replaced with new behaviors in an attempt to keep up with the changes that are occurring in society.

INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

Nursing leaders must be prepared to respond to the changing paradigm with creative and innovative methods. As Porter-O'Grady, Hawkins, and Parker¹¹ advise, "The traditional delivery infrastructure must be reinvented to support a new understanding of work, health, information, quality, outcomes, relationships, and intersections within an organized delivery system."

Transformational leaders will use quantum thinking, focusing on whole systems and the ability to integrate across systems.¹¹ The new science research from physics, biology,

and chemistry, along with new theories of evolution and chaos, have revealed a quantum interconnectedness within organizations.⁸ A transformational leader recognizes that order is a temporary state within an organization and that disorder is an essential complementary aspect of growth. Transformational leaders are able to function within this chaos while communicating the vision, values, and beliefs of the organization.

Transformational leaders develop innovative responses through expanding their reading and continuing education experiences to nonnursing disciplines such as organizational and management theory and research, quantum physics literature, and complexity theory and organization science. Knowledge of complexity theory allows nursing leaders to recognize that health care settings are complex, adaptive systems that require new mental models instead of bureaucratic models.¹² The strategies of transformational leaders will be diverse, emergent, complicated, and based on information-driven networks.

NURSING ADMINISTRATION FEEDBACK

As nursing educators develop and adapt nursing management course work to promote transformational leadership skills, they look to health care providers and research findings to provide guidance. A focus group of nurse executives from the Midwest, led by two of the authors, recently discussed the expectations they had for nursing managers who enter the rapidly changing health care environment. The themes expressed by the group were similar to those of a transformational leader.

Group members expressed a desire for an individual who could build teams that would enhance connectivity in the work setting. Being able to develop relationships in which decision-making can take place was viewed as essential for a workforce that can quickly respond to environmental changes and consumers' requests. Being empowered to make decisions based on information available to a team leads to a larger number of adaptive behaviors. Multiple interpretations and solutions to problems provide an organization with flexibility and environmental sensitivity.

Another theme expressed by the focus group was that of a leader who has the ability to see the large picture in a situation. Through the relationships developed by a transformational leader, complex and timely behavioral responses are more likely to occur. Participation in groups allows for an information exchange that enlarges the view of a transformational leader.

Finally, the focus group discussed the importance of financial knowledge by a nursing leader. Being able to balance the need for patient safety with the financial budgetary restrictions requires an individual with strong critical thinking skills. As the IOM⁴ report outlined, management practices that create safe health care environments and promote the success of an organization balance the tension between production efficiency and reliability (safety).

CONCLUSION

It is easy for the nursing profession to lose focus in the turbulent society of the 21st century. Faced with a never-ending shortage, increasing demands from the public and employers, and powerful forces of change, transformational nursing leaders can have profound influence on the transformation of health care settings of the future. Wheatley⁸ advises us "...to embrace our despair as a step on the road to wisdom, encouraging us to sit in the unfamiliar seat of not knowing and open ourselves to radically new ideas" (p. 5). We cannot solve the challenges and problems of health care organizations using past management theories.

Transformational leaders are capable of altering the organizational environment in addition to beliefs and practices of nurses and other health care workers. By managing a professional, complex, adaptive system, a learning organization will evolve.¹³ Learning organizations can master the complex and dynamic health care environment and remain competitive and viable.

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1541-4612/ \$ See front matter
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doi:10.1016/j.mnl.2005.06.009