

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC



Being Too Good

Karin is a department head in a major metropolitan medical center, and she brings a wealth of unique and valuable experience to her position. She is about 2 years from retirement.

Karin elected to meet with me while I was working in another part of her hospital. We had about an hour together, and in that hour, she laid out the everyday experience of her job. When she arrived, she looked upset and quite tired. As we talked, she looked toward tears several times. Karin described her work life as excessively stressful, demanding, and exhausting. She said she had no time to think or to plan and that she was working far too much. She described lengthy workdays and weekends in the hospital at least three times per month. With some pride, she said things had improved because she used to work every weekend.

When I asked her what prompted her to work so much, she cited several reasons, including uncertainty in the environment, concern about her personal finances, and the fact that her manager works this much. When I inquired further about her boss, she offered ample evidence that, indeed, the CNO seemed to work as much or more than Karin. In Karin's mind, her manager's behavior sent her an unequivocal message: being on the job this much was expected and not negotiable.

In my role, I encounter too many nurse leaders like Karin. They are well intended, good hearted, and genuine. In addition, leaders like Karin usually possess at least one of the following characteristics:

They are very good at what they do. They excel in most or all of their areas of responsibility. Often, they also excel at the jobs they have left behind, the ones their direct reports are now supposed to accomplish.

Whether they use this word or not, they feel like victims and believe they are seriously overworked. They feel like they can't take vacations or go home at a reasonable time. For reasons that don't have anything to do with finances, they believe they cannot retire.

They feel misunderstood. Their spouses, family members, or managers just don't understand

that they don't have time to develop others or engage in self care.

Especially when they are very good at their jobs, they want things done their way. When direct reports and others don't comply, they cannot fully endorse their efforts.

They have an exaggerated sense of their own importance.

How many of us know—or are—well-intended nurse leaders like Karin? I suspect many of us recognize her, so it is important to consider the byproducts of “being too good.” Here are just a few:

- We prevent others from developing their own abilities. This creates dependence that harms our direct reports and us. This behavior inappropriately perpetuates newer leaders' tenure as beginners. For example, Karin said she did not have time to train her three new direct reports. Two of them showed great potential, but they needed guidance from her. The third was already an expert but not in this new organization. She, too, needed Karin's thoughtful help.
- We burn ourselves out. We lessen our value because we are simply too tired to be effective. Sometimes we don't even know we have reached this state, and our colleagues can find it difficult to tell us.
- We believe we contribute to the success of our organizations because we overfunction, come in on weekends, and roll up our sleeves at every opportunity. But we don't understand that our over-the-top contributions can undermine our organization's capacity to create excellence by growing all its team members. We inadvertently sabotage the system's long-term viability because we deprive it of filling its “bench” with robust leadership capability.
- We model poor priority-setting skills. We also model the inability to let go of responsibilities that are not essential for us to accomplish.
- We fail to say no over and over, showing a serious lack of personal awareness of our impact on others. No matter how much we attempt to address, fix, and control the environment we are in, we cannot effectively manage it all.

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- We are unable to function within the boundaries of our roles. When we do our work plus that of our direct reports, we are essentially condoning "overfunctioning." If we are interested in developing a culture of accountability, we are sending the wrong message. Rather than encouraging accountability in others, our behavior creates passivity in others. By doing their work

too, we essentially say, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it for you."

So what are the antidotes for being too good? Even if leaders like Karin know they need to change, it can be very difficult to actually do it. Frequently, their identities and self-confidence are derived from achieving so much on the job.

If you find yourself in this scenario, or if you know of someone who is functioning in this way, here are some ideas to consider.

Karin has lost her ability to determine what's important. She is so accomplished and experienced that everyone in her unit depends upon her. Karin needs to take a hard look at what only she can do. Those—and only those—are the areas on which she needs to focus. She needs to create a plan to delegate more effectively or develop those to whom she already delegates. She needs to seek support from others to implement and sustain her new plan over time.

If we are too close to the work to see what the priorities really are, we need to ask for help to determine them. There are at least three sources of guidance available to us: the first and most obvious is the boss. Hopefully, this individual can step out of whatever benefit she derives from our overfunctioning and into identifying the goals that are truly most important for us to achieve. Our direct reports may also be excellent sources of input. They know what they most want from us; they can see where we excel and the areas in which we have much to teach them. Let them tell us; we don't have to agree with all their suggestions, but we can at least listen. Finally, peers that work closely with us can also see our strengths and our blind spots. They have good suggestions, too. As with direct reports, we don't have to accept every idea, but we will learn if we pay attention.

If we are contemplating a very big change such as retirement or even moving to a different job or organization, and we are finding it difficult to move ahead, we can ask for help. We can seek support from our families, friends, or professional counselors or coaches. Major life changes such as retirement present enormous opportunities to grow, and contribute in new ways. But for many of us who are

used to organizational life, this next chapter can be difficult to imagine and even harder to initiate.

We can also ask for help from our bosses, direct reports, peers, and professional colleagues. If we are stuck in "being too good," and we sincerely want to change, we can solicit backing from those with whom we work. If we are genuinely committed to change, it will benefit not only those around us, but us as well. Most people will be only too happy to work with us as we shift gears.

If we know we "should" stop behaving in these ways but are simply unable to do it, we can step back and away for a short time. We should ask ourselves what we really want in our lives. Is it an exhausting 60- to 80-hour work week? For most of us, the answer is no. But we may not have a clear picture of the life we'd rather have. Stepping away for an afternoon, a day, a weekend, or longer can give us the opportunity to carefully think about our next chapter. What do we want to be doing? With whom? How much do we want to work, and what do we want to do? What is our ideal day? What kind of contribution and/or legacy do we want to make? Answering these reflective questions helps us build out a vision for our own future. If we can become clear about this vision, we have a much better chance of creating it.

We all have something to gain when leaders know when to stop. Leadership that truly nurtures and inspires our organizations is that which focuses on self and other development. That allows us to serve well because we are personally "fit." We are in a far better position to attain organizational goals, superior patient care, and excellent customer satisfaction.

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBC, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio[®], a national firm that provides coaching and leader-as-coach training to nurse leaders and nurse managers and their teams. She is an experienced healthcare leader and a master certified coach. She can be reached at cathy@leadershipstudio.com.

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