

## The Challenges of Being New



In her seminal work *From Novice to Expert*, Patricia Benner, RN, PhD,<sup>1</sup> applied the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition to the development of clinical nursing practice. I believe that much of the Dreyfus Model can be applied to the development of new nurse managers and leaders, as well.

Benner and Dreyfus teach us that when we are either novices or advanced beginners, we need:

- The direction of others more experienced than we are
- The opportunity to observe and receive support from good role models
- Understanding regarding the “state” we are in. That is, as novices, much of our focus may be on ourselves and how we are performing in addition to the outcomes we are achieving.

As novices and advanced beginners, new leaders can be nervous about their roles and how they are faring. When they do not experience ample support, they may be at risk. Without solid backup, they may not last, let alone excel in their new positions.

Many seasoned nurse leaders believe they provide sufficient developmental opportunities and nurturing environments for their protégés, yet it may be time to assess how supported new nurse leaders actually feel. Do they have what they need to achieve their leadership potential?

Here’s why I suggest this. I recently had the pleasure of teaching a large number of new nurse managers from a diverse array of health care settings. Some were younger, some were older, and all appeared to be dedicated to providing high-quality health care. I was impressed. Throughout the week, I was struck with how engaged they were in learning about leadership, how much wisdom they already possessed, and how committed they were to the core values of nursing. Yet I couldn’t help but notice what they said about their experiences as new managers. As a result, I am certain there is more we can do to assist, guide, and coach our future leaders.

Here are three examples of observations they offered:

- They talked about the “stories” in which their organizations live. While strong organizational cultures are helpful, even vital to our work, there are limits to the positive effects of organizational lore. Several of these managers reported that when they share a new perspective or suggestion, they hear comments like “That won’t work here because we’ve never done it that way.”
- They talked about their supervisory challenges. One spoke about nurses who socialize together at the expense of providing timely responses to patient call buttons. As we coached through this issue, this young leader observed that the organization has allowed this behavior to continue for years. She felt she was taking a significant risk by single-handedly addressing such inappropriate conduct. She noted that accountability had been lacking for some time and that she did not have visible organizational backing to change that expectation.
- Several said that we have not created a health care culture that is as generous as it should be. One person talked about the lack of “gracious space,” observing that “being personable and gracious is a dying art” in our field.

In addition to listening to these illuminating comments, I recently asked 60 new nurse leaders to rate themselves on the Kouzes and Posner<sup>2</sup> assessment of key leadership practices from their book *The Leadership Challenge*. These authors researched the behaviors of thousands of leaders in fields that include but are not limited to health care. One of the resulting five best practices is “challenge the process.” This means that effective leaders look for opportunities to take initiative, innovate, experiment, and take risks.

Significantly, not a single one of the 60 new nurse leaders rated highly in this category. When I asked the respondents why

they did not claim “challenge the process” as a strength, they said that they do not feel safe in taking risks and offering suggestions. They said they encounter resistance, lack of patience with their inexperience in the organization, and statements like “We tried that years ago and it didn’t work.” While all those reactions may be valid in the moment, too many of these occasions will blunt a new manager’s willingness to step forward and offer novel ideas.

So how can we better serve this new generation of nurse leaders? What else can we do to promote their engagement, their growth, and their effectiveness? Here are some opening thoughts.

1. We can allow them to teach us. We can permit and actively welcome their new ideas. We can appreciate their beginners’ minds.
2. We can encourage them to challenge us and our thinking. We can openly dialogue together, exchange-

ing the depth of our experiences with their fresh perspectives.

3. We can create safety for them so that, in appropriate settings, they can experiment.
4. We can be mindful of just how powerful we are as role models. We are not just role models when we are “on”; we are role models at every moment, whether we know it or not. As leaders, people watch and learn from us. They learn not just from what we say or what we do, but who we are. We at The Coaching Forum would love to hear from new nurse managers and leaders and those who are seasoned. What else can we do to nurture, mentor, and otherwise encourage new leaders to pursue, stay, and thrive in these vital roles?

#### References

1. Benner P. From novice to expert. New York: Prentice Hall; 1984.
2. Kouzes JM, Posner BZ. The leadership challenge. 3rd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2002.

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