

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC



## Shining Eyes

Just before we boarded the plane for our Midwest destination, my colleague and I received the news: the 3-day retreat we were about to convene might be cancelled. The chief nursing officer (CNO) who hired us had heard rumors that her team was not going to come, despite her careful planning. We didn't take it personally; she hadn't given them any details about the offsite session. But she had indicated it was an opportunity to deepen their leadership skills and their cohesion as a team.

The CNO (Rhoda) was newly promoted to her position in this health system that had changed ownership, replaced the entire management team, and implemented new organizational processes all in rapid order. Rhoda had planned this offsite to support and bolster her team of 25 nurses and their managers. She was acutely aware that the team had absorbed and endured the organization's many changes, most of which were beyond their control. Although Rhoda expressed compassion for that experience, she was also concerned about their lack of ownership of their actions, their behaviors on the job, and the potential consequences to patient well-being.

As we sat at the airport, my colleague and I listened by phone to Rhoda's concerns and explored her options. After considerable thought, Rhoda decided she wanted to go ahead with the retreat.

Much to everyone's surprise, we started the program the next day with the full complement of 25 nurses and their managers. That was the good news. The bad news was that although the team members were in their seats and "nice" enough, their body language and their faces told a different story. They appeared to be distrustful of the CNO and wary of us. At best, they seemed guarded; at worst, they seemed cynical and disengaged.

In the *Art of Possibility*, Rosamund and Benjamin Zander talk about "shining eyes," which they use as a metaphor for the "spark of possibility" when a person is enrolled in a new vision that is of his or her own making. Rhoda's team members' eyes were not shining—far from it. If ever there was a situation that called for transformation, this was it!

As the first day progressed, the group started talking about how they saw the organiza-

tion and their roles in it. They had many complaints, and they railed against a system that required new processes even as the accompanying back-office procedures were still under development. The team saw themselves as victims and assigned blame to everyone around them.

Although they listened to the CNO, they regarded her with skepticism. The team spoke with a unified voice. It was clear that through all their trials, they had become a close-knit community with formal and informal leaders firmly in place. The CNO was new to her role but she was well known by this team, and she was not in either leadership camp.

This aggrieved group had many reasons, some justified, for their feelings of powerlessness and blame. They, the CNO, and we as conveners had our work cut out for us. As facilitators, we knew our roles and that the team's long-term success could be achieved and sustained only by the participants and Rhoda.

So what did Rhoda do in the face of this significant challenge?

1. Over the course of the 3 days, she clearly laid out her expectations for attendance, participation, and outcomes. She invited the team members to speak their truth and to listen to one another with respect and without judgment. She supported them in creating explicit behavioral guidelines for the retreat. She stated that there would be no repercussions for what they discussed.
2. She explained that her commitment to this retreat represented an investment in each of them and in the team as a whole. She told them she had faith and confidence in them; she demonstrated empathy and support without dwelling on grievances for situations that were over, done, or beyond their control.
3. She stayed in the room, she left her Blackberry in her purse, and she listened far more than she spoke. She participated when her voice as leader was called for, but she did not dominate and she did not capitulate when the group looked to her for "easy" answers that were the group's to create.
4. Although cordial and collegial, she was not overly friendly with us as facilitators. She realized that the group could easily construe a

cozy dynamic of aligned facilitators and the CNO as “them against us.” What did the team members do?

1. Despite rumors to the contrary, all of them showed up every day. Many of them arrived 30 or more minutes early.
2. They listened more and more intently as the retreat unfolded.
3. They were not afraid to speak up. If they didn't agree with a facilitator or one of their team members, they said so.
4. They demonstrated a visible change between the end of Day 1 and the beginning of Day 2. The second morning provided a chance for them to voluntarily share their reactions to their work together so far. In response, one or two of the informal leaders offered surprisingly personal comments that demonstrated a sense of vulnerability and risk-taking. This created the space for others to do the same.
5. They replaced their sarcastic and edgy comments with more respectful ways of communicating.

By the time the retreat was over, the team showed early signs of transformation. They realized that despite all the difficulties that were beyond their control, they still owned their roles and responsibilities. They considered what parts of their problems were of their own making. They shifted their focus from the finger-pointing of the past to the possibilities for the future. They developed action plans and accepted responsibility for implementing those plans, in concert with the CNO and other appropriate team members.

Although the real test of the outcomes lies in their long-term success, this group is on its way to becoming a very different kind of a team. They were certainly bonded before the program, but their previously unchecked behavior brought out the worst in everyone and in the team as a whole. In contrast, their openness during the retreat allowed them to practice being a different kind of community, one that demonstrates respect even while disagreeing and

one that is focused on ownership and positive change.

At the end of the third day, amid their touching appreciations for one another and the CNO for creating the conditions for their success, their eyes truly were shining. They reflected brighter images of one another and their hope and commitment to create a better future for their team, their organization and their patients.

### Reference

1. Zander R, Zander B. *The Art of Possibility*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press; 2000.

*Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio, a national firm that provides executive coaching, leadership development, and leader-as-coach training to nurse and healthcare leaders and their teams. She can be reached at [cathy@leadershipstudio.com](mailto:cathy@leadershipstudio.com).*

1541-4612/2011/ \$ See front matter  
Copyright 2011 by Mosby Inc.  
All rights reserved.  
doi:10.1016/j.mnl/20xx.xx.xxx