

The Readiness Factor



Let's consider two scenarios. In the first, Karen is a nurse with 25 years of management and leadership experience. She wants a new job so she can use her full complement of leadership skills. She has all the right credentials, yet after 2 years of looking, she has been unable to secure a new position.

In the second scenario, Ramona is a vice president in a large health care system. She has eight nurse manager direct reports, and she recently terminated one of them, Cindy, because of Cindy's lack of follow-through and her unwillingness to be accountable. Cindy's poor performance affected patients, staff nurses, and Ramona's other direct reports.

Once Cindy was gone, Ramona decided to devote scarce financial resources to a team retreat. Her planning was meticulous, and her goals were clear: acknowledge the hard work and success of the remaining managers, rebuild morale, and instill greater accountability into the team. The retreat was more successful than Ramona expected, yet several weeks later, Ramona's direct reports had even lower morale than before, and accountability had not improved.

What do these two nurse leaders have in common? Karen and Ramona are not taking the "readiness factor" into account.

What is the readiness factor? Readiness refers to our *intrapersonal* self-awareness and management, and our *interpersonal* ways of relating to others. Intrapersonal readiness means that we consciously acknowledge and manage our own emotional state. Interpersonal readiness means we are aware of how we are relating to others and what our impact is.

How does readiness apply to Karen, the nurse leader with the experience and the credentials for a new leadership role? People who interact with Karen describe her as bitter and whiny; they feel uncomfortable in her presence. They say she has an attitude of entitlement when she talks about her current employer. Karen thinks

she is prepared for another role that is more challenging, and on paper she is. But discerning hiring managers are not selecting her because she speaks so negatively about her current job. They can see that Karen has not done the personal work that is required to successfully move on.

What about Ramona? The retreat went beautifully and the immediate results far surpassed anything she and the team could have imagined. However, Ramona was not ready to reinforce those results in ways that mattered to her team. The team had experienced what they described as a trauma with Cindy, the former team member. Although they discussed these difficult events during the retreat, the team needed Ramona's attention and support *after the retreat* to heal the past and to sustain their fragile new direction.

Ramona had not prepared herself to do what was required after the retreat was over. She had not considered that a successful retreat might require a shift in her focus, too. She intended for the retreat to change the team's morale and behavior, but she did not consider her impact and role in supporting the change she wanted to see.

Ramona was not ready to do anything different after the retreat. In fact, she took a 2-week vacation right after the gathering. When she returned, the postretreat glow had passed, and the team's low morale had returned in a more virulent form. Why? The team believed they had tried and failed to fix their problems. As a result, they were even more demoralized.

These two examples show us that our lack of attention to readiness can be quite costly. Karen is meeting potential employers who are turned off by her negativity, and she is losing her professional standing in her community. Health care teams that could use Karen's expertise are not benefiting from it. Ramona spent scarce dollars and time on a retreat, yet the process actually harmed the team because they could

not sustain their fragile new beginning. As a result, the team members felt defeated and unsuccessful.

What went wrong? Neither Ramona nor Karen reflected on these critical questions: *Am I (or are we) ready to be successful? What it will take to get ready? What is my (our) emotional condition, and how am I coming across right now? What is my impact on others? Am I prepared to take care of myself and/or support others so I and we can sustain success?*

Most of us do ask ourselves reflective questions when we contemplate needs or opportunities, but we concentrate on the required skill-based competencies and front end resources. We are not as diligent when contemplating whether we and others are emotionally prepared to move ahead, and we do not always attend to what is needed *after* a change, a promotion, or an initiative has taken place.

Recognizing Readiness

A lack of readiness may look like resistance, confusion, anger toward others, or passive/aggressive behavior. For example, Karen exhibits whininess and an inability to let go of the negative emotions about her current situation. That's her story and she's sticking to it.

When individual contributors and teams are not ready, they may agree to proceed with a new plan or idea, but they are not fully committed. They may subtly, and unconsciously, sabotage the project. They may have questions, but they may not ask them. They may withdraw but still show up in body, but not in spirit. They may do what is required, but they will not extend discretionary effort.

By contrast, when we and others are ready for new challenges, we display some or many of these qualities:

- We are curious and energized by what is new.

- We are motivated to achieve fresh goals and greater success.
- We are open to feedback and we are not defensive when we receive it.
- We anticipate, provide, ask for, or receive support when we and others need it.
- We are open and truthful with ourselves and others.
- We are ready to be challenged with new material, new people, and new opportunities.
- We take risks when they are appropriate.

The Leader's Role

A leader has three key responsibilities when it comes to readiness:

1. *Assess the readiness of direct reports. In addition to monitoring the qualities mentioned above, leaders will also consider:*

- Clinical, administrative, or other technical training required to take on the new assignment
 - Interest in moving ahead in the direction the assignment suggests
 - Ability or inability to let go (eg, displaying an excessive attachment to peer group or "the way things were")
 - Being clear or being stuck in a victim mentality (eg, demonstrating a strong emotional connection to perceived wrongs done to themselves or others)
 - Commitment to professional growth and advancement, personally and organizationally
 - Values alignment with other organizational leaders
 - Sufficient self-awareness to reflect on and manage one's own problems and limitations
2. *Provide appropriate resources to prepare others for new challenges and responsibilities. These include:*
- Vehicles and time for training
 - Support through coaching, mentoring, peer groups, or similar means

- Sufficient lead time for the preparation to take hold
- Recognition of small wins and big successes

3. *Offer support before, during, and after the initiative so progress can be sustained.*

Although all nurses are not candidates for better jobs, more responsibility, and greater team effectiveness, many are. Once equipped with greater awareness of the readiness factor, nurse leaders can provide support, training, coaching, or other forms of preparation for their managers, staff, and themselves. The readiness factor operates under the radar in many situations. When we actively address it, all of us gain.

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