

What Change Really Means



Think back to a time when you were faced with a significant leadership challenge. It does not matter whether anyone else would consider this a crucial event. What *does* matter is how you experienced this moment in your life.

What comes to mind? Now, consider this question: *What important leadership lesson did this experience teach you?*

At this moment, if you are considering this question, you are engaging in the most important work a leader can do. You are reflecting on what you are doing and who you are being as a leader. You are harvesting the learning from your own leadership journey.

How often do we move from meeting to meeting, challenge to challenge, and task to task without examining our actions and the reactions they evoke? How often do we slow the action enough to ask ourselves if our behaviors are consistent with our values and beliefs?

Several esteemed nursing leaders offer powerful examples of just how beneficial this kind of reflection can be. To prepare for this column, I posed this same question to the members of the Nurse Leader editorial board. I asked them to tell their stories and to consider what they had learned about leadership. They offer two potent demonstrations of learning in action. These are not incidents others even noticed, but they are moments that literally changed these leaders' lives from that point forward.

The first case in point occurred in the start-up phase of a professional practice initiative. A crucial juncture arrived when this individual was faced with a compelling question: was he going to stand up for what he said he believed about professional practice and allow it to be implemented? Or was he going press ahead with his current practice of micro- and macromanaging every element of the process? How could he square his own behavior with the professional values he professed to hold? Was he going to take what he perceived to be a very big risk? Was he going to let go and allow others to step in and do their parts?

His answer was “yes,” and with this “yes” came a highly successful program and “a pivotal moment in my own leadership and practice. It changed my professional life and pathway, forever,” he said.

Another editorial board member also spoke about an instance in which her beliefs about stewardship were called into question. She was frustrated because a decision needed to be made about maintaining a costly program. The health system was facing financial pressure—continually—and this executive acutely felt the demands of keeping the costs down. She held a meeting with other senior leaders to discuss the fate of the program. After an hour of talk in which no decision was reached, she announced to the group that she alone was going to make the decision.

Rather than accept her proclamation, the team members pushed back. With respect, they told her that she had not allowed enough time for the conversation and that, although she was a participative leader, she was shouldering too much of the burden and the risk. What did this teach her? “That being alone at the top is part of the past and not the future. This totally changed my approach. From that point forward, I made far better decisions with the team. Equally important, I relaxed during my remaining 3 years in this position.”

What do these executives have to teach us—you and me—about leadership? What common themes do their tales hold? In both circumstances, the leaders experienced a crisis of sorts, a moment in which they realized their behaviors were not working. The stakes were high. Their emotions were engaged. Notice, however, that their emotions were not hijacked. They were able to experience their feelings without being rendered ineffective by them.

Both of these leaders were willing to relinquish habits that had been in place for years. Each leader saw that times had changed. Their actions in these circumstances no longer served others or themselves. Both executives risked a new way of

being. Both were willing to evoke, listen to, and genuinely hear the wisdom others offered.

Each also faced a moment of fear—would the new approach work? With no guarantee, each said “yes,” taking a substantial risk in the process. In a word, each of these leaders was willing to authentically and deeply change.

What lessons do their stories offer you? What are your own stories of leading and learning? Please tell us. Please share your challenges. We are eager to listen.

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