

Leading with Accuracy



How aligned are your intentions and your outcomes? How comparable are your images of yourself with the ways others see you?

Why do I invite you to consider these questions? Often nurse leader coaching involves exploration of these questions. Each of us carries filters, distortions, and other impediments that prevent us from being honest with ourselves. An unintentional lack of truthfulness about how we portray ourselves can seriously limit our efficacy with others.

Nurse leaders who take the time to get real about who they are, what they think, how they feel, and what they truly value have a clear picture of themselves as human beings and as leaders. When they couple these reflective questions with queries about their impact on others, they have a far better chance of achieving the results they desire.

Leading accurately is a big topic, and here we address just one aspect: leadership presence. In this column, leadership presence means congruence between our beliefs about ourselves and the way we actually appear to others. How accurate is the story we tell ourselves about our effectiveness? What blind spots might we have about our real impact on others? How similar are our words compared to the nonverbal messages we send? Do we present a coherent picture? Since we are the leadership “vehicle” for our message, is that vehicle harmonious or is it discordant?

Here is a true story about a coaching client I will call Olga. She has held a senior role in a complex health system for many years, and she has earned multiple degrees, secured elected positions, and received accolades throughout her career. She speaks formally and informally in many public venues.

Recently, she asked me to accompany her to an event in which she was an observer. While we were there, she was asked to speak spontaneously to a large group of her nurse leader colleagues. She arose, spoke for a few minutes, and returned to her seat.

Later, we reviewed what she had done with this unexpected opportunity to address the group. When she asked for my assessment, I said I thought she was articulate, powerful in her delivery, and just a little bit stiff. I asked what she thought of her public moment. She said she perceived herself to be tongue-tied and awkward, with nothing to say. In fact, she was embarrassed about how she had shown up in the group.

Our versions of what had occurred were quite different. We talked further and discovered that Olga frequently sees herself as being ineffective in group settings. I have seen her in many such circumstances, and I let her know that I see her impact as significant and powerful. As her trusted advisor, I was not saying this to assuage Olga. Nor do I believe my truth is necessarily “the” truth. But, with my view, Olga had another perspective to consider.

If Olga had not sought another opinion, what might the consequence have been? First, she would be living within the confines of her unchecked story. Given her belief that she had embarrassed herself, it’s possible Olga would have been demure in conversations after the meeting. It’s possible that her postmeeting demeanor would diminish her power and potential in the eyes of others.

To be sure, her colleagues’ prior experience would inform their views of Olga prior to this incident. Still, it’s quite possible that Olga’s belief about the event and her likely self-deprecating actions afterward could create a self-fulfilling prophecy: others could perceive her as awkward and not very powerful.

Longer-term consequences might be even more significant. Because I work with Olga, I know that she has limited herself to roles that are satisfactory but not challenging. I know that she has hesitated to pursue her big professional dream. I know that she has procrastinated on tasks that will help her actualize the contribution she really wants to make to nursing and health care. She is not playing the bigger game that she is entirely capable of playing.

This is just one example of a leader's interaction among thousands of others. While you and I cannot stop the action to reflect on the subtleties of every exchange, look at the value Olga received by asking about just one moment of her day.

As you think about whether and how this story applies to you, ask yourself whether you want outside input to assess the accuracy and impact of the leadership picture you are presenting. If you do, here are several tools you can use.

Solicit the input of others.

Three-hundred-and-sixty-degree instruments provide important information about how we are perceived by others. Less formal feedback can be equally valuable. In this instance, Olga asked for my impression after a few moments of speaking with a group. Had she not sought another's point of view, she would have lived within only her own self-diminishing story about the event.

Make it safe for others to respond. For people to respond openly, they need to feel respected, valued, and protected. They need to know their honesty will not cause retribution.

Consider the questions you want to ask. Some examples are: "What did you notice about me in that situation?" "What did you experience as a positive?" "What was not so positive or otherwise distracting for you?" "What impact do you think I had?"

Thank those who respond. Knowing that you have received the message well, no matter what its content, will support and deepen your relationship with this person. It will also create the conditions for you to receive more helpful feedback in the future.

Realize the limitations of others' points of view. The comments of others are offered through the lens of their own per-

spectives. This is true for all of us, regardless of our intentions. It's always possible that the input says more about the sender than it says about you.

Check the fit. Feedback offers us new information. It is our responsibility to consider whether and how accurate the data are for us. You can ask yourself whether this perspective is valid for you. Is any part of it valid? If so, what might you be doing to create these impressions? What other curiosities do you have?

Consider your follow up. Do you want to change an observation that concerns you? Do you want to take any action? If you believe that making a shift has merit, yet you are resisting, what is your resistance about?

Determine if you want or need support as you make this change. If you decide to take action, do you need support? If so, what mechanisms or agreements do you need to put in place?

The benefits of leading with congruence and accuracy are considerable. In this example, Olga later added this feedback to other input that was equally positive. As a result, she has learned about her impact on others. She reports feeling more confident. She is more aligned and satisfied, and she is moving forward toward her dream with greater momentum. This simple exercise helped to release a real barrier for Olga.

Leaders whose presence sends congruent messages are more likely to be perceived credibly. Close alignment of your words, your overall presence, and your stated values are powerful. Congruence and accuracy allow others to listen to your messages more fully; they are not distracted by messages that simply don't track.

The greater your leadership accuracy, the more likely you are to be heard with the full measure of your intent. I invite you on the

exciting and rewarding journey to your full power and effectiveness.

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