

Developing Others in Challenging Times



The *Nurse Leader* editorial board, editor in chief, and I extend our sincere thanks to the many readers who submitted inquiries to “The Coaching Forum” during the 2007 AONE annual meeting in Washington, DC. A central concern emerged from your questions: what are the best ways to develop others when time is limited, your responsibilities are great, and the circumstances are taxing?

While difficult organizational realities are here to stay, there are simple strategies that can help you grow other people, even in demanding times. Here are four suggestions:

- Ask questions that inspire listener-generated solutions instead of automatically providing your own best answers.
- Determine your part of the responsibility for your subordinates’ behavior.
- Evaluate the “readiness” of your subordinates to grow, change, and learn to do things differently, and if they are not ready, help them prepare.
- Assess your own readiness to take on the task of developing others, even in challenging situations. If you are not ready, what do you need to become ready?

These strategies can be used in most developmental conversations. For example, they can be used to address your concerns related to developing high potential leaders, coaching managers who are facing situations that are operationally or emotionally challenging, and successfully providing your mentees with constructive criticism.

Let’s work this through by using the real experience of a nurse leader in a complex health system. Linda has a large scope of responsibility and plenty to do. The behavior of one of her subordinates, Alida, has bothered her for several years. Linda says Alida has good clinical skills but she does not perform her management responsibilities adequately. Unfortunately, Linda made this assessment long ago. Since then, she has had numerous talks with Alida and has initiated two or three developmental plans.

However, Linda did not follow through with consequences or coaching when Alida failed to meet her performance objectives. Instead, Linda backed away when she found it easier to simply do the job herself. Also, Linda directly told Alida what to do when she asked questions about tasks that she should be competent to perform. In one way or another, Linda took over most of Alida’s management role. She also worked up a lot of resentment toward Alida. Ironically, Linda is committed to developing others. She sees its value, and she enjoys the process with subordinates *when they are less challenging*.

After months of frustration, Linda finally made a commitment to curtail this unproductive cycle. She decided to back up, reflect, understand, and correct her own behavior. As a result, she and Alida are now engaged in a new performance plan. So far, both parties are on track with their respective commitments.

How did this occur? What did Linda learn about fulfilling her intention to develop others, even in the midst of her own time pressures and vulnerabilities? Here are the highlights:

1. **Linda is conflict averse.** When Alida did not succeed, despite rigorous corrective plans, Linda did not confront her because it was uncomfortable. She decided to solve the problem herself because she did not want to have a difficult conversation. The lesson for all of us is to assess our own readiness to tackle the sometimes tough discussions that are necessary to develop others. We need to be honest with ourselves. If we are not ready to have challenging conversations, what will it take for us to get ready? Do we need more courage, more skills, both? One successful strategy is to practice tough dialogues with a trusted colleague or coach. Decide the desired outcome of the discussion, practice your portion, listen to how you sound, and adjust until you believe it is good enough.

2. **Linda gave Alida a lot of instructions.** She made a mistake that is common among leaders who are in a hurry. When Alida had a question, Linda simply gave her the answer or did it herself. She did not pause long enough to consider that Alida was no longer a novice. In fact, Alida was well prepared to come up with her own solution if prompted by relevant questions. Linda was giving Alida the answers because it was automatic behavior and because Linda wanted it done her way. As a result, Linda was not coaching Alida—she was simply solving Alida’s problems over and over again. Therefore, Linda taught Alida that she could rely on her to give her the answers or do her work. In other words, Linda’s behavior gave Alida permission to perform at a lower than acceptable level.
3. **Linda learned that she was largely responsible for Alida’s continuing failure to perform her managerial tasks adequately.** She also learned that her resentment of Alida’s behavior was understandable but misdirected. Linda realized that Alida’s continuing poor performance was a result of Linda’s own tacit permission. Linda discovered that she was aiding and abetting unacceptable behavior in a subordinate.
4. **Linda recognized that this pattern was observed by Alida’s peers.** They were learning the same behavior, and the future consequences for Linda could be quite negative. Linda learned that before acting on possibilities or deficits of others’ performance, it is important to evaluate her own part in the current situation and to be clear about her role going forward.
5. **Linda had no idea whether Alida was equipped to become a competent manager.** Although Alida had sufficient training and time on the job, Linda had failed to determine Alida’s readiness to

take on its challenges. If Alida was not ready, what was missing for her? What did she need to get ready? Perhaps she needed positive support and mentoring, or perhaps she needed to take a refresher course. Perhaps she was not really interested in being a manager. Linda did not know what Alida needed or wanted; she only knew Alida was not performing well. She had acted on that awareness repeatedly without stopping to assess or talk with Alida about her interest in and readiness to improve.

Practicing these four strategies can help you support others as they grow into their full potential. Embracing these approaches can provide you with great satisfaction as you see your staff evolve, even in the most challenging situations.

Finally, these four practices can help you and all of us become more reflective. As we engage others in the hard work of becoming better leaders, we ourselves are similarly engaged. We grow, too. We become more humble, more self-aware, and more powerful. The process greatly benefits us. It benefits those with whom we work even more.

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