



Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC

The Dream Beneath the Dream

Kimberly was a successful service line director in a mid-sized medical center. The chief nursing officer (CNO) recently submitted her resignation after a lengthy tenure, and Kimberly was interested in her position. She had long felt that the CNO had retired on the job. Although the CNO was well liked in the organization, Kimberly was frustrated with her leadership, believing she herself was highly qualified and ready to take over. As Kimberly saw it, she had successfully implemented many new initiatives, was well regarded within the hospital, and deserved to be the CNO. She was eager to roll up her sleeves and do whatever was necessary to obtain the job.

As Kimberly put together her plan to become CNO, it became clear that many factors would influence her fate, including how her peers, bosses, and direct reports viewed her achievements and personal qualities as a leader.

To begin, Kimberly created a detailed account of her accomplishments in the organization. At the same time, she considered the potential challenges she could face. To learn what others thought and to discover any barriers they might present, she initiated confidential one-on-one conversations about her candidacy. She spoke with the CNO and others on her team, and she also met with other peers and people who reported to her.

Much to her surprise, Kimberly got mixed reviews about her CNO potential. Here are some of the comments:

1. A few people said she would be great in the role, but others gave more muted support.
2. She was told she excelled at service-line operations but that she was not a strategic thinker or player. Some people were uncertain about her ability to lead at the CNO level, particularly given the physician and community challenges the organization would face in the near future.
3. She learned that some individuals had a decidedly negative view of her personal attitudes. They said she complained a lot; several people said they knew she didn't "like" the CNO and that her feelings created tension within the team.
4. A number of her staff members no longer saw her as a "good" leader. This was a change. They

said Kimberly inspired and motivated them to do their best in years past, but of late, her behavior disappointed them. They thought her attitude was negative and sarcastic.

This input gave Kimberly considerable pause. She had accrued vacation time, so she decided to take 2 weeks off. For the moment, she kept her hat in the ring for the job.

This edition of the Coaching Forum focuses on Kimberly's journey because it holds lessons for all of us as we face our own leadership road ahead.

Kimberly began with a dream that she thought represented her primary goal for the next phase of her career. She undertook the important work of soliciting input from key stakeholders. She took time off and, during her time away, asked herself many questions: What led to this feedback? If it were warranted, what did she do to create these results? What were the most important steps for her to take now?

In addition,

1. **She took time to reflect** on the specifics of the feedback. Rather than defensively deflecting the input, she gave herself time to take in what she had heard.
2. **She carefully evaluated the feedback** and considered how much and what part was accurate. Kimberly "checked the fit" of the comments. Were some of them warranted? All of them? None of them?
3. **She honestly assessed her attitudes and behaviors.** She knew that she in fact had become more vocal about the CNO and her certainty that she would do a much better job. Upon further consideration, Kimberly realized that she had shifted her attention away from her own leadership and toward her boss' shortcomings.
4. **She held her professional dream loosely.** She did not abandon it, but she did ask herself difficult questions. Did she really want to be the CNO? Why? What was this quest really about? If she didn't really want to be CNO, what *did* she want?
5. **She considered her deepest values.** She had loved managing the service line in the past. She loved leading others, and when she could

By the time she returned, Kimberly was renewed and refreshed. She was clear that she wanted to re-earn her team's respect and recommit to her current position and the work she really loved.

truly motivate them, it made her work all the more enjoyable and productive. As a team, they had accomplished so much. Now that team members no longer saw her as a leader they admired, she felt very disappointed.

6. **She realized that her emotions had been running the show.** Somewhere along the way, she had stopped paying attention to herself as a leader and instead started fixating on her boss.
7. **She questioned her need to be right.** Kimberly realized that she had let her sense of virtue and righteousness get in the way of her better judgment. Focusing outside of herself dulled Kimberly's ability to detect the signs that her key relationships were deteriorating.
8. **She thought about the skills she most wanted to emphasize going forward.** Kimberly knew that she was gifted at operations, also loved operations; she truly enjoyed creating and implementing complex plans for patient services.

By the time she returned, Kimberly was renewed and refreshed. She was clear that she wanted to re-earn her team's respect and recommit to her current

position and the work she really loved. On her first day back, she thanked those whose candid comments were crucial to redirecting her attention to what mattered most. Shortly thereafter, Kimberly learned that the organization had chosen its top three CNO candidates, and she was not among them. She was genuinely relieved. At the same time, she knew she had benefited from her candidacy. Her quest helped her reconnect with her deepest professional values. Her real dream was able to emerge. Kimberly's heartfelt wish was to be an inspiring service-line leader with a motivated team that accomplished great things for their patients. For Kimberly, this was more than enough. For now.

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio, a national firm that provides leadership development programs and coaching for nurse leaders, nurse managers and their teams. She can be reached at cathy@leadershipstudio.com.

1541-4612/2009/ \$ See front matter
Copyright 2009 by Mosby Inc.
All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.mnl.2009.09.004