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Managing an Onslaught of Change

Is there such a thing as too much change? Many of us would say yes. So what? Nurse leaders at all levels of a system must manage the amount of organizational change that is present, whether we think it is too much or not.

Recently, I was asked to work with a team of exceptional nurse leaders who are experiencing many significant changes in their organization. These changes included some they could control and some that were uninvited and beyond their control, such as moving into a new facility, preparing for critical recertification visits, and implementing numerous staff changes and promotions.

To add to their already full plates, their chief nursing officer (CNO) recently resigned to pursue an outstanding opportunity. The remaining team members understood and supported that decision; most believed that they were well prepared to move ahead, even though the CNO had been a significant contributor to their organization's success. Still, they had a lot of feelings about the loss of their leader. They also felt anxious about who their new boss would be and what additional changes she or he would initiate.

To help weather these transitions, the organization's remaining senior leaders decided to elevate about half of the nursing leadership team to larger roles. Those individuals were given new titles, along with the label "interim" (so the new CNO could decide whether to make the promotions permanent).

When I visited this facility, I encountered leaders who, to a person, were committed to patients and outstanding patient care. But when we drilled down just one level, I found other similarities that were disturbing:

- Most of these leaders looked defeated and reported feeling exhausted and overwhelmed.
- Their schedules were beyond full. Days were often 12 or more hours long. The leaders were meeting their usual commitments and also attending the many other meetings required by the upcoming move.
- Most leaders had still more meetings to attend as a result of new responsibilities and positions.
- Finally, I discovered that information about the departure of the CNO and the tempo-

rary promotions had been promptly shared with some leaders but not others. As a result, the whole team was starting to distrust the remaining senior leaders. They were also concerned that the senior leaders were playing favorites with the rest of the team.

On the whole, the team's behaviors, feelings, and attitudes seemed to belie their historical power. I had worked with them before, and I knew that they could operate at full-throttle energy and effectiveness. This time, however, they were disheartened and overwhelmed. The way in which they "showed up" as individuals and as a group suggested a story of deep fatigue, defeat, and too little time to absorb the following:

- New learning and the responsibilities of their new jobs and reporting relationships
- The uncertainty of how long their jobs and reporting relationships would last
- Unclear expectations about what to accomplish and how far to go with their own ideas with their interim roles and interim bosses
- The challenges of leading a significant organizational initiative (the move)
- The need to think and act strategically in the face of so many operational demands
- Uncertainty about a new and unknown CNO

If you similarly find yourself in the midst of orchestrating major organizational change and requiring the extraordinary efforts of your leaders, what best practices can you use?

- Encourage self-care. If your team members can't identify their true priorities in the midst of a long list of "musts," help and encourage them to sort them out. Give them parameters and offer them feedback so they can reduce their list of must-do activities.
- Understand that human beings can become unhappy when major change occurs and they don't understand or feel they have complete information and a say in their future.
- Realize that senior leaders are more effective at leading change when they communicate those changes, including what is known and not known, over and over again. Even if leaders think they have already said what is happening, they need to communicate their

knowledge again and again.

Successful change leaders share their news in multiple venues: one-on-one sessions and staff meetings, town halls, newsletters, e-mails, etc.

- Include opportunities for two-way dialogue to signal your openness and respect, and to promote understanding and trust.
- Do not ask selected others to keep secrets because it can erode trust and breed rumors. Leaders and staff who are not in the know are often aware that there are secrets, even if they don't know the specifics. When people know something is happening and suspect that it will impact them, they become fearful and open to unfounded rumors. Some will even make up stories to explain what they don't know or understand. In the absence of authoritative information, those on the receiving end of rumors have no way of knowing what's true and what isn't. The bottom line: too many secrets destroy trust between leaders and the people who look up to them.
- Be visible and demonstrate courage when there is news to share. Be honest and straightforward about it, even if it's bad news. People hearing garbled or incomplete truths can become angry and confused. They can slide into inaction, depression, disempowerment, and fatigue.
- Be thoughtful about temporary titles and reporting relationships. If you do establish them, set parameters and be available to address questions and concerns for the duration of these assignments. At the beginning, specify whether you want them to assume caretaker roles or act in more substantial ways. Clarify what you mean by either or a mix of the two approaches.
- Create big spaces for your leaders to fill, even if their roles may be temporary. Don't inadvertently let your leaders fall into a minimally productive, "let's wait and see mode," even if their future bosses are unknown. Give them stretch goals for the near term. Allow them to focus on what

the organization needs. Let them continue to realize their potential and be successful.

If you are a leader who is on the receiving end of a great deal of change and transition, remember to focus on your own well-being, as well as your effectiveness as a leader. Review the list above; if you need more information or feedback in any of the listed areas, ask for it, even if your manager doesn't initiate the conversation.

Remember who you are as a leader. Even if the circumstances create huge unknowns for your future, remember yourself at your best. Think about what you do when you are at your best and identify what you can do in your current situation to bring out your best again.

Ask yourself what opportunities the uncertainty offers you. If you can't think of any, ask yourself again. Keep asking until you start to see some benefits in your less-than-ideal situation. Remember that, even if your circumstances are not what you want, *you* are in control of how you think about and manage yourself and others.

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