

Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC



## Diminished Returns

**W**e usually think of a strong commitment to work as a positive attribute for leaders, but this column offers a story of two nurse leaders whose intense dedication to their work is actually hurting their performance and rendering them ineffective.

Martha is a nurse leader in a large national organization, and she is experiencing a great deal of difficulty in her new role. She has angry outbursts with colleagues, and she does not see eye to eye with the chief executive officer (CEO). She believes another member of the senior team is “out to get her,” and she has examples that “prove” that this is true. Although her CEO still hopes that Martha will succeed in her role, he has insisted that she retain an executive coach to give her a boost.

Gloria is the CEO of a complex healthcare organization, and she, too, is having trouble on the job. Unlike Martha, Gloria has been in her role for many years. Gradually, she has grown frustrated with the board of directors. Despite her consistent efforts to offer “a better way,” they are moving the organization forward in ways that she does not completely support.

Lately, Gloria’s frustration has grown. At the same time, the board has registered concerns about her performance. Gloria says she feels defeated and angry, and her dialogues with the board are increasingly at odds. Her usually full schedule has become even more demanding. She says she is “too busy” to exercise and often eats heavy meals. She has difficulty sleeping without medication. Her limited free time is consumed with chores, and she does not have time for her children and grandchildren.

Although Gloria and Martha lead very different healthcare entities, they share important characteristics:

1. They are highly educated and experienced nurse leaders.
2. Their work in the healthcare world has brought them respect, acclaim, and recognition.
3. Until now, they have been effective and persuasive in their roles.
4. They are both on the precipice of abruptly leaving their jobs, either because they can’t tolerate the conditions or because they will be fired.

5. There is a victim-like quality in their descriptions of their predicaments.

What else do Gloria and Martha have in common?

- Neither is taking care of herself. Gloria’s self-care habits are compromising her effectiveness and possibly her long-term health. Martha has had life-long medical challenges that, with attention, can be accommodated in a busy professional’s life. Indeed, Martha has successfully managed them for years until now.
- Neither can see her own resistance and the impact of that resistance on the powers that be. One is resisting the board, and the other is resisting the CEO and other senior staff. Neither comprehends that her resistance is negatively affecting her behavior and her performance.
- Neither can see that she is overwrought and that her ways of “giving” on the job and “staying the course” are producing diminishing returns. The ways in which these leaders are demonstrating their commitments are actually hurting their effectiveness, and not just a little bit.
- Each has been given clear feedback that her performance is not optimal: Gloria has received less-than-glowing performance reviews, and Martha’s CEO insisted that she see a coach for corrective help. Despite this irrefutable evidence, both leaders continue to bring the same behavior and viewpoint to their work.

Before we conclude that these leaders are anomalies with possible emotional or mental difficulties, it is important to consider their positive attributes and intentions. One started her new job by immersing herself in learning. She devoted many nights and weekends to understanding everything she could about her new role. Unfortunately, her positive intentions led to doing too much, and this compromised her health just as she began to grapple with the politics of her new position.

The other is a strong leader and expert in her field. She knows she has a lot to offer; it is very difficult for her to relinquish the authority she believes she has earned, particularly when there are board members who know far less than she.

What should these leaders do to reverse course and recapture control of their own futures? Their best options are surprisingly simple, and most involve self-care. We think of self-care as so obvious that its value is easily understated. We ignore self-care and its importance at our own peril, however. Without enough rest and time away from the intense work of leadership, Gloria and Martha are rendered blind to what is right in front of them: they are not effective and their co-workers are telling them this in no uncertain terms.

Other remedies are also critical and not so easy.

1. Each leader's resistance can be her teacher. When we are leading and people resist us, it behooves us to examine the feedback to see if there is a modicum (or a lot) of "truth" in the complaint. When we ourselves resist, it is wise to acknowledge and examine our own resistance to see what truth our feelings may contain. For example, Martha accepted her new position without a full understanding of its challenges. Her eventual resistance was a reaction to being exhausted and not being perceived as competent for the first time in her professional life. Gloria resisted a negative performance appraisal when she felt she knew more than her board and had done everything "right." Her weariness precluded her from seeing her own attitude and its effects. Her diminished physical state prohibited her from acknowledging the board's legitimate right (and obligation) to guide the organization as it saw fit.
2. When people question our leadership performance, it is important to consider what is being said. Wise leaders are aware of their emotional state (tired, frazzled, feeling like we can't win, etc.) and acknowledge resulting tendencies such

as blaming others. Refreshed leaders know that only they can redirect what is happening to them and thoughtfully navigate the best ways forward.

### WHERE DO MARTHA AND GLORIA GO FROM HERE?

First, Martha can ask herself whether she really wants this job. The cost to her family and herself is considerable. She may not want to admit that her choice may have been a mistake, but it is preferable to acknowledge that rather than to sacrifice her health, her family's well-being, and her reputation.

If Martha does want this job, can she work less and establish better health habits? Is she willing to discipline herself and eat properly, exercise enough, and get sufficient sleep? What will it take for her to make this level of commitment to herself and her own care?

Is Martha willing to do what it takes to re-engage with her colleagues? Can she openly listen and adjust her style and her work products to meet the CEO's expectations? Is she willing to do the hard work of addressing her challenges with the fellow leader who is "out to get her"?

Gloria has a different set of decisions. She has been in her role a long time, and the board of directors has been pursuing a course that she does not favor. The board shows no signs of shifting. Gloria needs to consider whether this position is still the best fit for her.

If she decides she still wants to be in this job, what will it take for her to fully support the board's decisions? Can she direct the staff and guide the resources of the organization so they accelerate the mandates of the board? Can she authentically embrace the board's goals and expectations?

Both leaders need to let go of what they believe to be past injustices. Can they do this? In what ways can they reframe past events so they no longer see themselves as victims? Can they let go of the wrongs they feel have been done "to" them?

Although Martha and Gloria's stories may be different from our own,

their journeys vividly illustrate the dangers of excessive good intentions, hard work, and long hours when the fruits of so much labor are not what we expect.

*Catherine Robinson-Walker, MBA, MCC, is president of The Leadership Studio®, a national firm that provides executive coaching, leadership, and team development to nurse and health care leaders and their teams. She can be reached at [cathy@leadershipstudio.com](mailto:cathy@leadershipstudio.com).*

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