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Coaching Comes of Age

I like to think of *Nurse Leader* as a highly focused vehicle for learning, and in this way, it is not unlike coaching. As this magazine's second decade begins, I am so happy to say that coaching, too, has come of age. Nurse leaders and healthcare's other stewards are seeking and using coaching to full advantage and in ways that were far from common when *Nurse Leader* began.

When we launched a decade ago, leadership and executive coaching had a strong positive presence in business enterprise throughout the United States. However, most healthcare and nurse leaders still viewed "coaching" as code for "an intervention" for poor performers. Ironically, the recipients of these interventions often had too much resentment to get much from their "coaching."

There is a key difference between what coaching meant then versus what it means now. In the past, many in healthcare saw coaching as something that was "done to" an individual or a group. Now, coaching is a facilitated process that allows an individual or group to "do unto themselves"—that is, they manage their own learning as they grow in new and significant ways.

Now, most nurse leaders no longer think of coaching as just a step on the disciplinary path. It is true that coaching can still be developmental when an employee's skills are deficient. But today, it is more common for coaching to be a proactive strategy to accelerate growth, increase presence, or enhance some other crucial aspect of leadership effectiveness that will sharpen an already good leader's edge. Today, many nurse leaders embrace coaching as a custom-designed vehicle to enhance their own growth, impact, and power on (and off) the job. They also see the capacity of coaching to accelerate their teams' capacities to manage change, achieve desired results, and improve interpersonal relationships.

Although leaders and teams enter into coaching for their own particular reasons, nearly all of them deeply appreciate the confidential nature of the relationship. The privacy of coaching creates safety for participants as they explore their real concerns, their unique perceptions and challenges, and their options, scenarios, and plans. It also gives them a safe outlet to talk about experiences that don't go well.

Here are three nurse leaders who took full advantage of what today's coaching offers.

Renetia accepted a new, highly responsible position in an organization that was new to her. She sought executive coaching to help her onboard, and her 9-month coaching engagement focused on these elements:

- Understanding the politics of the new organization
- Determining the priorities of a highly complex, demanding, and high-risk role
- Identifying quick wins and pivotal relationships
- Managing stress and "overwhelm" while maintaining a healthy lifestyle

Renetia also talked about successes and challenges in previous positions so that she could learn from her earlier wins and missteps. She reviewed the important lessons of her past and explored the realities of her new position. Because of her willingness to learn from previous "derailers," she lessened the chances that she would face similar problems in her new job.

When *Renetia* concluded her coaching, she had more confidence, felt more comfortable in her fast-paced job, and had developed strong organizational allies and support.

Sunny is an up-and-coming star. Libby, one of the senior leaders in her organization, sought executive coaching for *Sunny* as part of the organization's succession strategy. Although the coaching centered entirely on *Sunny*, it was anchored on both ends by meetings with her coach, her immediate supervisor, and Libby.

Sunny's coaching focused on these elements:

- A 360°-process that helped her understand the effects of her strong results orientation on the people around her
- An emotional intelligence assessment that revealed some of her strongest drivers and their impact on her life, work, and the people around her. These drivers made sense to *Sunny* once she learned about them, but she had not been conscious of the power they had on her behavior.
- Her work-life balance, health habits, and ways of relaxing. Although *Sunny* is relatively young, she realized that she could not continue to deny herself and her family by

working 60-plus hours a week if she expected to sustain her health and personal relationships.

As Sunny concluded her coaching, her mentor (Libby) heaped praise on her for her great leadership strides and how seriously she took her tailor-made opportunity to learn. She declared Sunny a “diamond” as compared to a “diamond in the rough.”

Lorraine is the leader of a large, complex organization that is undergoing significant change and challenge. She sought coaching to ready her leadership team for the hard work ahead. She also used the executive coach as a confidante as she discussed her concerns about the organization’s future.

At the outset of coaching, the team measured itself on a variety of dimensions of effectiveness. After reviewing the results of their self-assessment, the team and their leader decided to focus their coaching on these specific dynamics:

- Effective decision making
- Increasing the quality of their communication within and outside the team

- Enhancing intrateam relationships, including managing conflict and differences of opinion
- Increasing trust among team members
- Becoming a true team as opposed to a group of high-performing individual contributors

As the team’s year-long coaching arrangement drew to a close, they believed they had greatly improved their performance as a team. They also said they learned much more about themselves as individuals and as a team. They had a new appreciation for difference and saw the value of multiple points of view, especially as they contemplated high-impact, high-risk decisions.

If we step away from the details of these leaders’ experiences, they reveal two important best practices in coaching. Neither of these would have been possible 10 years ago when coaching in healthcare was viewed as a negative “intervention” done to some by others.

The first best practice is that all of these exemplars willingly took responsibility for their own learning and

growth, and they used the coach’s skill to support rather than dictate that growth. Second, because these “coachees” actively guided their own learning journeys, they gleaned critical, timely insights into themselves. They also had deeper appreciation for their own strengths, challenges, impact on others, and the way forward. This would not have been possible had they not been courageous enough to do their own work from the inside out. Coaching has reached a great milestone when leaders access it to do the work that is important to them versus focusing solely on the work that is important to others.

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