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Chapter 3: YOU WANT ME TO LEAD?

- By Wrennah L. Gabbert, PhD

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“Leadership involves finding a parade and getting in front of it.” - John Naisbitt

Do you know EVERY Nurse is a Leader?

Do you know EVERY Nurse is a Leader? I did not know this when I started Nursing School and certainly did not know that I would lead Teams, Shifts, Units, Departments and Schools during my nursing career! I also did not know that volunteering to be on Department and institutional Committees, have an idea about how to resolve a “challenge” or just having an idea of a project that would promote collaboration and teamwork would label me as a Leader, but it did! As a result, I have spent a great deal of time locating and using resources and tools I could use to try and make individuals and groups feel a little bit better in scary, uncomfortable situations. I have learned the use of appropriate and timely humor is one of the most successful tools I can use to establish rapport and provide an element of normalcy and comfort in frightening or anxiety-producing situations. I have also found laughter and tiny “sparks” of joy can relieve stress and build bridges to “connect” nurse leaders to individuals and teams. As one of my nursing colleagues so eloquently stated “I believe the most important role of a leader is to build Trusting Relationships. A leader’s circle of influence is more important than authority or control. Leadership is about discipline and intelligence, not about who has the heavier hand (Dent & Tye, 2018).”

“Well Here We Are...Up in the Air!

Well here we are...up in the Air! Well, that remark was a a stupid thing to say!" - Groucho Marx

One of my favorite Groucho Marx jokes happens when, through a series of events, the Marx Brothers end up flying an airplane! Groucho turns toward the camera and says, "Well here we are up in the air!" and a few seconds later looks at the camera and says "Well, that remark was a stupid thing to say!" Every time I think about it I chuckle and sometimes even laugh out loud. During times of stress at work, as a Charge Nurse, in a children's emergency department I developed a habit of saying these phrases to myself (or I thought I was saying them so no one else could hear). I found out that my habit had spread to my co-workers one night as we were preparing the trauma room for a patient. I said the first part and a co-worker nicknamed "Mighty Mouse" (MM being a tiny lady who could "morph" into twice her size and stand her ground easily when confronted with angry or upset patients or family members) answered me back with "Well, that was a stupid thing to say!" I looked up at MM and saw her holding a fat pen in her mouth like a cigar and wiggling her eyebrows like Groucho! Bottom line, the whole team had a good, quick laugh together and the tension dissipated for a few minutes (like a teapot letting off steam) until the patient arrived and we all focused on our tiny patient.

A new Nurse soon added "We may be up in the air but at least we are not up a creek without a paddle!" The phrase became another familiar touchstone as we all worked together in the trauma room getting ready for our patients. When I accepted a leadership position in another institution I was surprised with a short row boat paddle as a going away gift and said, "You may find yourself up a creek but now you will always have a paddle!" The Paddle remains a touchstone and provides a sense of normalcy for me and is the "first thing in" any new office and the "last thing to be moved out." The paddle and the memories of the nicknames we gave each other (and good naturedly endured) always remind me of not only good friends and colleagues who worked together in the dance of team work but also is representative of the constant cycle of assessment, communication, seeking answers and resolution in the practice of nursing leadership.



"So That's Where My "Humerus" Bone Is, Huh?"

“Leadership consists of nothing but taking responsibility for everything that goes wrong and giving your subordinates credit for everything that goes well.” – Dwight D. Eisenhower

It was 4:30pm on a Saturday afternoon in the Emergency Department and I was the Nurse Manager in an urban Emergency Department. I had just finished discharging a patient when the Receptionist from “out front” appeared at my elbow and whispered in my ear, “...someone in the Lobby is yelling “I want to talk to whoever is in charge in this place and I don’t want to ever talk to that other nurse again...she made fun of me!!!!” On the way to the Lobby she hurriedly told me, “...The irate patient was a 32-year-old male who hurt his left upper arm playing soccer and the triage nurse said it looks like he has a probable fracture but he won’t give me any other information and is now screaming to talk to the Supervisor!”

As I followed the Receptionist out to the Lobby I could see a group of 5 young men in soccer shirts and shoes with one loudly proclaiming, “No, I have only had 5 beers you have had a lot more than that!” as he pointed to a man holding his left elbow and pacing.” As I approached the group I could see one man pacing and wincing as he held his left arm to his side. There was swelling over the mid-humeral area. I introduced myself and asked him to sit down in the wheelchair I brought with me. He replied, “I’m not going anywhere because she (pointing in the Triage Nurse’s direction) made fun of me! I have only one question to ask you!” I said “Ask away!

Because you are going to need some care and I would like to get the process started!” He pointed to his arm and asked, “What is this called? As he pointed to his upper arm.” I said, “That is your upper arm and there is a bone under the skin and nerves called the humerus. Right now it is very swollen and you need to get in the wheelchair and give the receptionist some information so we can check out your circulation and nerves and get you taken care of!” He sank down into the wheelchair like he was a balloon popped with a pin. As he deflated he looked up at me and said, “so that’s where my humerus bone is, huh?” I said “Yes! Did she point at your arm and say, “That’s humerus?” He looked at me and said, “Yes ma’am!” And as I started wheeling him back to the ortho room he added, “...I thought she was making fun of me and I didn’t see anything funny about it! My arm is really killing! I answered, “Let’s get a little more information so we can get you taken care of but I promise you No one thinks it is funny that you have hurt yourself! Are you good with the plan?” “Yes ma’am” and added, “Can you tell the guys who brought me in that “I TOLD YOU IT WASN’T FUNNY!”

A Founding Member of the Order of the Sterile Syringe

As a beginning nursing student, I found out there was a series of tasks I had to successfully learn and be “checked off on” before I would be allowed to go to my first clinical experience. One of

these tasks was to successfully administer an intramuscular injection (i.e., “give a shot”) successfully in the Nursing Skills Lab with my Nursing Instructor observing. With shaking hands, I gave my first “shots” (one to an orange and then to a real live human being). All of my classmates and I successfully completed this task. At the end of the day, our Clinical Instructors held a recognition Ceremony. They proclaimed we had all passed a great test of courage and determination. They also gave us each a Certificate of Recognition and declared we were all now members of the of the “The Order of the Sterile Syringe.”

Years later when I was teaching in a nursing program and we were working hard to get everything ready for an accreditation Site Visit for our Department a level of anxiety and tension had been trickling into our conversations and discussions. I remembered how many chuckles and laughs we had as a result of the “sacred and silly” Ceremony our Instructors held for us held to initiate us into the “Order of the Sterile Syringe. I felt a modified version of this Ceremony might provide a “stress break” for our faculty and staff team. I talked with our Department Chair and she agreed and approval was granted. received approval. A couple of my colleagues and I developed a plan for our Ceremony and a Survey with questions including “How long have you been a Registered Nurse? What is your area(s) of expertise?” At the next Total Faculty Meeting Certificates and badges were made and distributed. A Proclamation was read including: “Whereas, In this group of honored Nurses there are those among us that do believe unspeakable catastrophes will occur if anyone even whispers the feared words on any shift, “Boy, it sure is quiet around here!” and “Therefore, having been identified as member of the “few, the proud and the silly” and having collectively contributed to the Nursing profession the astounding, collective number of 598 years to the Profession of Nursing It is to be proclaimed that from this day forward these Registered Nurses are Founding Members of this Sacred (and Silly) Order of the Sterile Syringe. Be it also known there is one other recognized Order of this sacred group in a land far away on the other side of our great State and hundreds of unrecognized Orders world-wide.” After the Ceremony, funny experiences were shared and jokes were told, chuckles were heard along with a couple of good belly laughs. Almost everyone was a little more relaxed for the remainder of the faculty meeting as we re-focused on the plans for the upcoming Site Visit.

The Turkey Trot to the Parking Lot

As Department Chair I was looking forward to moving into a brand-new, state-of-the-art building! The Nursing Faculty and Staff were excited due to the upcoming move after decades in smaller building on campus! One concern voiced frequently was “What in the world are we going to do about the mountains of old papers and out-of-date books that need to be thrown away?” We were thrilled to learn that a truck designed for shredding and disposal of paper and books was going to be provided for

us by the Dean of our College and positioned in an adjacent parking lot! The truck was scheduled for a day right before the brief Thanksgiving break and the event was dubbed, "The Turkey Trot." I thought it might provide a chuckle or two if a short survey was created and a "contest" related to the "stuff" we found as we cleaned out our offices was created. We all "trotted" and decluttered! A few days before the BIG MOVE we held our final Total Faculty/Staff Meeting for the semester. When I asked the final survey question, "What was the oldest thing you found in your office?" Several faculty called out the names of magazines and books from 1972, 1988 and 1990. Then one young faculty member who shared an office with his faculty mentor called out the name of his office mate! Everyone had a good long, loud laugh and the one who laughed the loudest and longest was the senior nursing faculty team member. That good laugh led us all into a much more relaxed discussion about the timeline and processes for the upcoming move.

YOU Can Do This!

"Leadership has been defined as the ability to hide your panic from others." - Lao Tzu

The past pandemic year has been a tough one for everyone in the healthcare world. The anxiety and stress at work and at home seemed like it had no "end in sight." The pictures of Nurses and Doctors whose faces were covered with bruises and abrasions from where their masks and personal protective equipment rubbed their faces during their grueling long shifts were hard to look at!

Once again, as a Professor and faculty team member, my first thought went back to the great philosopher Groucho Marx, "Well here we are up in the air!" I could see the anxiety and uncertainty in our first semester students faces as they struggled to put on their gowns and masks for the first time. The students were unsure of how, why and when to wear their masks, face shields, gowns and groves. As the weeks and months wore on and the students practiced the necessary tasks, this behavior (along with social distancing and wiping down all of the hard surfaces and their hands) was normalized – somewhat. Once again Skills Labs were held for the nursing students and they practiced, demonstrated and were eventually "checked off" and deemed ready for their first clinical experiences. The initial giggles, laughs and declarations of "You look like an alien in an old sci-fi movie" disappeared. The remarks of "I look and feel silly in all this stuff" turned into pride that "I can do this!" At the end of the semester all of the first semester students successfully "landed their airplanes" and progressed to the next semester ready and willing to accept the challenge of BEING Nurse Leaders.

References

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About Dr. Wrennah Gabbert



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