The Urgency of Creating a Culture of Caring: Start With *You!*

Kim Richards, RN, NC-BC

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**Introduction**

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

—*Peter Drucker*

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study makes the facts unequivocally clear:

A survey of turnover in acute care facilities found that replacement costs for nurse positions are equal to or greater than two times a regular nurse's salary. Turnover costs, in general, are estimated to range between 0.75 to 2.0 times the salary of the departing individual. Nurse turnover costs are estimated at 1.3 times the salary of the departing nurse.  
The loss of veteran nurses is especially costly. Nursing expertise takes years to develop; when experienced nurses leave, health care systems pay a heavy price because less experienced nurses may not recognize symptoms as quickly, understand systems, or know the best ways to avoid certain medical errors. (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009, para 3)

Wow. With the high costs of *staff* turnover, consider the costs of *leadership* turnover. In addition to direct recruitment dollars, the uncertainty of roles, disruption in direction, and additional responsibility placed on others is enormous. In an already "stretched to the max" environment, nurse leaders can find themselves working out of their depth and training and/or beyond their maximum capacity.

Creating a culture that cares *for* and *about* nurses could be the most significant recruitment tool for a health care institution. Nurses talk to their neighbors, families, friends, and, more importantly, to other nurses and to candidates who interview for leadership and staff roles. As a veteran executive recruiter, I can attest to many an interview that should have gone smoothly, yet went sideways due to comments or an uncomfortable silence that occurred during interviews. Word of "culture" spreads like wildfire, whether positive or negative. Nurses are good at reading the tea leaves, no matter what we hear about strategy.

At a recent nursing leadership conference, evidence of stress and fatigue was abundant. While most attendees were upbeat, deeper conversations with attendees revealed comments such as the following:

* "We have so many initiatives going on at the same time and my workload is becoming heavier. I'm feeling exhausted and behind from the time I get up to the time I go to bed. I don't know how long I can keep this up without cracking."
* "I feel like the better I perform, the more I am delegated additional responsibilities. It feels more like punishment than a reward!"
* "I love being a nurse leader and I love my staff. But I see all of us putting in more and more time, more and more energy with little of both left over for ourselves. I am very worried about the effects of fatigue and stress for myself and my team."
* "I am caring for my parents, my family, and my staff…it's taking a toll on my health but there's nobody else to help."

Many of these sentiments were said in an almost hushed tone, as if to suggest guilt, shame, and weakness. Yet, these leaders are highly talented, productive, and compassionate warriors who had the courage to talk about their vulnerability and challenges. They are highly educated, effective, and respected leaders who, through honest self-reflection, had come to embrace their humanness. They were seeking to bring back presence, saneness, and empowerment to their lives as well as the health of their staff. The ineffective "crazy busy" lifestyle was crushing their ability to bring their boldest self to their biggest challenges. The baseline of normalcy had risen to a dangerous level and they were burning out.

**Investing in Human Capital**

"Health is not only to be well, but to use well every power we have. The martyr sacrifices themselves entirely in vain. Or rather not in vain: for they make the selfish more selfish, the lazy more lazy, the narrow, narrower."

*– Florence Nightingale*

To significantly and sustainably transform an organization into a thriving culture of caring, or to catapult one that attracts top talent with little turnover is not a simple task and requires a multipronged approach. It does, however, start with leadership that understands the value of partnering with experts while investing in its greatest strength: human potential. Professional coaching, both from a leadership and retention or "caring for the caregiver" perspective, can greatly enhance opportunities for improving resilience, reenergizing and reengaging leadership and staff, and breathing new life into your institution's culture.

Pamela DeCampli, MSN, RN, NEA-BC, executive vice president, Kirby Bates Associates, and well-respected leadership coach states:

The coaching relationship must be built on mutual respect, reflective thinking, and honest, nonthreatening communication. Understanding that a coaching relationship is not a personal friendship is critical to success. The ability to agree on a desired course, establish structured goals, and communicate effectively about progress towards goals is the foundation for effective coaching. Creating a self-care culture among nursing leaders and staff often leads to decreased turnover, increased staff resiliency, engagement, and ultimately improvements in productivity and patient satisfaction.  
Retention statistics of all participants in a formal coaching program spanning 9 years reveal that out of the 42 participants, 32, or 76%, have remained in their respective leadership positions with the longest being a little over 8 years. Seven leaders have subsequently been promoted and as is sometimes the outcome, three individuals were assessed to not be the correct fit for the position and were ultimately not successful in their respective roles. (P. DeCampli, personal communication, 2016)

Sometimes success is found in the process of turning *away* from something to turn *toward* something else. Wise, self-aware, and forward-thinking nurse leaders fully embrace the notion they are not only leaders on an organizational chart, but exemplars of healthy behavior, respectful boundaries, and authentic communication. This includes finding a balance that nurtures their souls and fuels the tremendous energy, emotional intelligence, and empathy needed to inspire, motivate, and support a team. This is not an easy task! Should proactive self-care and nurturing of spirit not be a priority, nurse leaders can easily find themselves depleted, ineffective, feeling lonely, and fearful of potential consequences of such. Every day we experience uncertainty, risks, and exposure. We've all heard aging is not for sissies, but neither is the role of a nurse leader.

How are you, as a nurse leader, perceived by staff? Can you lead by example when creating a culture of caring for your caregivers? Creating opportunities for leaders and staff to practice self-care is achievable. As a simple example, one client hospital created a roaming smoothie bar for their caregivers, stocked with nutrient-dense ingredients. The "bar on wheels" went from floor to floor each day, offering a low-cost option for power-packed nutrition. It was a huge hit and greatly supported a culture of caring. Innovative ideas are abundant!

**Practicing Self-care**

While there are multiple and varied pathways for nurses and nurse leaders to practice self-care, here are three things you can do immediately to energize your and your staff:

1. *Get enough sleep.* Nurses need adequate sleep and rest. In a meta analysis of the relevant literature of over several hundred studies, Rogers (2008) found there were no positive effects from sleep restriction in healthy adults. Despite the wide range of methodologies, the results are similar: insufficient sleep is associated with cognitive problems, reduced job performance, increased safety risks, medication errors, mood alterations, and physiological changes**.** Additionally, depression, irritability, and stress levels increase when sleep is restricted.

There is also overwhelming evidence that nurses who work longer than 12 consecutive hours or work when they have not obtained sufficient sleep risk negative effects on the health of their patients, themselves, and, if nurses drive home while drowsy, even the general public (Rogers, 2008).

As Jaime Murphy Dawson, MPH program director, department of nursing practice and work environment, American Nurses Association states:

The research is clear that fatigue is extremely hazardous to nurses' health and also adversely impacts patient care. It's also important to understand that nurse fatigue has financial ramifications on health care systems. Direct costs to employers include increases in health care costs, workers' compensation costs, early disability costs, and recruitment and training a new employee when a nurse leaves as a result of poor health or burnout. (J.M. Dawson, personal communication, 2016)

We may think we are being more productive, yet the converse is true. As we overwork, trying to catch up, we actually are becoming *less* productive and robbing ourselves of the only time our minds and bodies have a chance to reset to normalcy. Have you ever noticed how your perspective changes and solutions seem to appear after you are sufficiently rested? It's not a coincidence.

2. *Set boundaries and limits.* Doing so allows you to lower the anxiety in your life. Sound counterintuitive? Think of it from this simplified perspective; there are only 24 hours in a day and your "to do" list will never be done. Say "no," more often to commitments (without the associated guilt!) that intuitively feel like a burden. The more you say it, the easier it gets. Let's face it, your work will always be there and you can always do more. It is the reality of the health care industry.

"There is no need to go to India or anyplace else to find peace. You will find that deep place of silence right in your room, your garden or even your bathtub."

*- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross*

This also translates to purposefully disconnecting from your devices – a tough one, isn't it? Perhaps remembering *we teach people how to treat us* can help with shifting perspective. If we consistently respond immediately to a message or question, we effectively condition people to expect the same response at all times of day or night. The more we focus on relationships with our devices, the less connection we cultivate with the most important people in our lives. Be *fully present* when you are present. Yes, you *are* being watched by your staff, your family and your colleagues.

"And every day, the world will drag you by the hand, yelling, 'This is important! And this is important! And this is important! You need to worry about this! And this! And this! And each day, it's up to you to hank your hand back, put it on your heart and say, 'No. This is what's important.'"

*- Iain Thomas*

3. *Start a mindfulness practice every day.* Health care leadership is stressful, there's no denying it. Challenges are inherent and circumstances are often not optimal, leading to chronic stress and adrenal fatigue. Mindfulness has been described as a "moment to moment awareness of one's own experience without judgment" (Davis & Hayes, 2012, p. 64) and can reduce mental stress. Selfregulation practices focus on training attention and awareness in order to bring mental processes under greater voluntary control. These processes foster improved mental well-being and specific capacities such as calmness, clarity, and concentration (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

Other benefits of mindfulness practice include:

* Reduced rumination (Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2008).
* Stress reduction (Hoffman, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010).
* Boosts to working memory (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010).
* Focus (Moore & Malinowski, 2009).
* Less emotional reactivity (Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007).
* More cognitive flexibility (Siegel, 2007).
* More adaptive responses to stressful or negative situations (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Davidson et al., 2003).
* Relationship satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007).

Mindfulness can enhance self-insight, morality, intuition, and fear modulation; all functions associated with the brain's middle prefrontal lobe area that nurses use when thinking critically. Evidence also suggests mindfulness meditation has numerous health benefits, including increased immune functioning (Davidson et al., 2003).

Mindfulness practice, even as short as 2 weeks, can create changes in the brain (Hanson, 2009). It seems neurons that fire together wire together. New patterns of thought can actually change the physiology of our brains. So while we can't ignore bad news, we can train our brains to become more alert to good information.

"The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another."

*– William James*

**A Healthy Bottom Line**

Healthy employees and healthy culture lead to a healthy bottom line and huge financial gains. An essential part of thriving is allowing vulnerability to bubble up and calling upon a skilled professional who has walked in your shoes to assist you in your personal version of excellence.

Imagine the outcomes on our national health care systems if nurses, at over 3 million strong, inspired by their healthy nurse leaders, committed to a lifestyle of self-care. Self-care is not self-ish; it is a mandatory responsibility as a professional nurse to fill your own lamp so you can illuminate *your* light for others. Let's take care of you first so you can take care of the rest of the world! Here's to your health!

**Sidebar**

**Executive Summary**

* With the high costs associated with staff turnover, creating a culture that cares for and about nurses could be the most significant recruitment tool for a health care organization.
* Professional coaching, both from a leadership and retention or "caring for the caregiver" perspective, can greatly enhance opportunities for improving resilience, reenergizing and reengaging leadership and staff, and breathing new life into your institution's culture.
* Healthy employees and healthy culture lead to a healthy bottom line.
* Imagine the outcomes on our national health care systems if nurses, at over 3 million strong, inspired by their healthy nurse leaders, committed to a lifestyle of self-care.

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