A Vision for Tomorrow: Transformational Nursing Leaders

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Background: Interviews with 8 transformational nursing leaders are presented.

Purpose: My purpose was to provide a picture of leadership principles and values as practiced by transformational nursing leaders.

Method: Interviews were conducted as person-to-person, by telephone, or through e-mail.

Disucssion: The leaders shared their transformational leadership qualities, ideas of a successful environment, effective change strategies, antecedents for success, and visions for the future of nursing practice.

Conclusions: All of the transformational leaders interviewed strive for excellence, value integrity, shape their environment for success, demonstrate perseverance, attempt to improve the lives of others, possess a genuine love for people, motivate others with inspiration, "invent" the future, and share the path toward self-discovery.

L eadership holds the key to transforming the nursing community.[1] As societal values change to focus more on human needs for hope, commitment, compassion, responsibility, respect, and opportunity, new styles of nursing leadership evolve.[1] Transformational leadership is a new leadership paradigm that encompasses the intuitive and emotional nature of people by placing emphasis on interpersonal relationships. *Transformational* leadership is defined as the ability to create supportive environments of shared responsibility that lead to new ways of knowing.[2-4]

During the past several years, the quality of nursing leadership has been examined in the literature. One of the major problems in nursing is the lack of nurses being actively engaged in efforts to positively influence the nursing profession.[2,3] Nursing leaders are being challenged to respond to this trend of disengagement by empowering nurses to develop the special qualities and attitudes that will enable them to become effective change agents. If the next generation of nurses is to be actively engaged in positive transformation, organizations that employ nurses must be replete with transformational leaders. Organizations that employ nurses will also benefit from the effects of transformational nursing leadership. Environments with transformational nursing leadership have higher rates of employee retention, production, and job satisfaction, resulting in a decrease in absenteeism and overall cost to the facility. Interviews were conducted with 8 nursing leaders to provide a picture of the leadership principles and values practiced by transformational nursing leaders. The experiences attained from these interviews will assist nurses from various areas of expertise to align their personal leadership style with one congruent with the values and principles of transformational leadership.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

On the basis of the review of literature, the following are 8 major attributes of a transformational leader: self-knowledge, authenticity, expertise, vision, flexibility, shared leadership, charisma, and the ability to inspire and motivate others. *Self-knowledge,* an important attribute of a transformational leader, is an awareness of personal beliefs, attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses. This attribute assists leaders to become cognizant of their values and beliefs to understand their motivations and responses to certain ideas.[5] By obtaining self-knowledge, transformational leaders demonstrate courage in their search for a new level of understanding.[5,6]

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Authenticity is when one's actions are consistent with one's most deeply cherished values and beliefs.[4,6,7] Transformational leaders are authentic individuals who act as they profess. This demonstration of authenticity helps foster trustful relationships and successful endeavors.[1,5,8]

Expertise is having the knowledge, skills, and technical ability required for the chosen endeavor. Transformational leaders are competent in their chosen area of expertise.[1] These leaders intellectually stimulate others to develop new ideas and creative outlets that support professional development and personal growth among members of the group.[3,6]

Vision is having the ability to articulate expectations for the future.[9-11] Visionary leaders can motivate others to appeal to

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their higher and sometimes unrealistic ideals. These leaders translate their dreams into reality by articulating the vision, explaining the vision to others, and developing the vision to achieve the desired goals.[1] Visionary leaders are creative and use their innovation to design the future.

Flexibility is being able to find comfort with ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity.[5,10,12] Transformational leaders easily adapt to new situations and simultaneously assist others to thrive in changing environments. These leaders demonstrate flexibility when they divide the labor so that each group member can make a significant contribution to the overall effort. Transformational leaders find comfort with ambiguity by providing the group members with clear, concise expectations of the assigned responsibilities. When group members have clear expectations, they can better understand their level of contribution.[1]

Shared leadership is when power is equalized among all members.[1,13,14] Transformational leaders share their path of self-discovery by intellectually stimulating others to develop new ideas and creative outlets. Shared leadership supports professional development and personal growth among group members. An environment of shared leadership questions basic underlying assumptions to instigate renewal and growth.[15-17] Shared leadership also promotes relationships that foster innovation and creativity among group members.[9,17,18]

Charisma consists of having personal charm that enables one to influence others.[18] Transformational leaders value the human need for supportive interpersonal relationships.[1,3,4,18] Charisma permeates each endeavor these leaders undertake, which helps them obtain respect and admiration from other group members.[3,17,19] Leaders with charisma are enthusiastic about the group's mission, loyal to the organization, respected by others, and can easily distinguish between the group's surface and core issues.[5] The *ability to inspire and motivate others* to achieve the desired goals[3,5,9,17] is an additional attribute of a transformational leader. Transformational leaders use their physical energy to motivate others to work toward the stated outcomes, instill confidence among group members, and create cohesive learning environments.[5,8]

Qualities of Nursing Leaders

According to the nursing literature, transformational nursing leaders possess the 8 mutually reinforcing attributes listed in the literature review along with other specific leadership qualities, which may or may not be found exclusively in nursing. In addition to the 8 attributes, transformational nursing leaders are assertive, active listeners, and self-confident yet humble. These leaders also empower others to become leaders, communicate decisively, use emotional control and time-management techniques, delegate effectively, and display a genuine love for others.[3,5,6,17] Transformational nursing leaders have many mutually reinforcing leadership qualities that allow them to thrive in environments that foster networking, change, political awareness, and collaboration.[2,3,5]

Table 1. Interview questions

1. What are some of your leadership qualities?
2. If you were to choose a metaphor or symbol to describe your leadership style, what would it be?
3. What is your idea of a successful leader?
4. What or whom was present in your environment that allowed you to achieve your success?
5. How did you alter your environment for success?
6. What in your life seemed to make the difference for your leadership success?
7. What type of people do you enjoy interacting with?
8. Do you work better independently or with others? Where do you find your collaborators?
9. When you experience change what do you focus on? What is your change strategy?
10. What have been some of the crises in your professional life? How did you handle them?
11. What 3 factors have contributed most to your success as a researcher, teacher, and consultant?
12. If you could design an environment in which you could be most successful, what 3 things would you include?
13. Who played a monumental part in your success?
14. Do you have a mentor and, if so, describe their leadership qualities?
15. What most important changes do you anticipate will occur in the field of nursing over the next 20 years?

SAMPLE AND INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Interviews were conducted with 8 transformational nursing leaders to provide a picture of their leadership principles and values. Of the 9 transformational nursing leaders (all women) who were contacted to participate in this study, 8 agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted person-to-person, by phone, or through e-mail. Each leader was asked 15 interview questions (Table 1).

These individuals were identified as transformational leaders in nursing because of their demonstrated evidence of scholarly work in publications, citation of research in other journal articles, disciplinary and multidisciplinary collaboration with other professionals, commitment to excellence in nursing care, and active involvement in community activities and professional organizations. The 8 leaders represented 6 different states from various geographic regions of the United States. These leaders had an average of 45 research, book, chapter, and/or journal publications, which provided evidence of scholarly work. All of the leaders currently hold or have held elected positions in professional nursing organizations. Many of the leaders also have received distinguished awards and/or honors from organizations such as Sigma Theta Tau, American Journal of Nursing literary awards, Kellogg fellowships, National League for Nursing awards, and fellows of the American Academy of Nursing. Several of the leaders have also been awarded the titles of "distinguished" and "endowed lecturer" at universities throughout the United States and internationally. Of the transformational leaders interviewed, one is a recognized expert in pediatric pain management, one is an acknowledged nurse theorist, two are recognized experts in pain management, and four are acknowledged nurse educators. The leaders inter-

viewed are national and international leaders in nursing who assume various roles of consultant, national/international speaker, theorist, administrator, practitioner, author, educator, clinician, editor, reviewer, researcher, role model, innovator, and mentor.

FINDINGS

Characteristics of Transformational Leaders

The transformational leaders interviewed identified credibility, resilience, optimism, integrity, clinical expertise, honesty, strong interpersonal skills, advocacy, organization, and dependability as their leadership qualities. The leaders described themselves as energetic, authentic, patient, innovative, self-confident, committed, and persistent visionary leaders who negotiate and initiate the future. They are not afraid to take risks and can elicit the strengths of others. The leaders use humor to promote their mission, enable others to make decisions and accomplish tasks independently, mobilize resources, empower and motivate others, and do all this without "needing the glory." These qualities of the leaders interviewed were consistent with those cited in the literature.[5,9,18,20]

Symbolic Leadership

One leader stated that her leadership style can be symbolized by Tom Sawyer. Her colleagues nicknamed her "Tom Sawyer" because she has been able to motivate others to join in achieving goals that they would not have attempted on their own. However, unlike Tom Sawyer, who used the opportunity to delegate and "supervise," this leader is viewed as someone who works alongside her colleagues, instilling encouragement and excitement. Great leaders can articulate a vision and unite others around it.[21,22] Another leader chose the expression "1% inspiration and 99% perspiration" to represent her leadership style because successful leadership requires a tremendous amount of hard work and a little bit of charisma. A lotus was used to symbolize another leader's style because it forms deep roots to allow the whole to blossom into its desired vision. One leader identified a lighthouse to symbolize her leadership approach because it provides a sense of direction and purpose, unveiling areas of risk and danger so that others can avoid them. The majestic elephant symbolized another leader's style because it has many guises and is known best for its "service to people." This leader described the elephant as being consistently steadfast, hardworking, agreeable, and smart but that occasionally it rebels and tears down the circus tent! The elephant personifies a very social animal that does better with its herd, is affectionate and playful, and knows how to lead and follow. The elephant lifts people onto its back and carries them, is resourceful in finding food, and faithful in staying with its dying members.

Conceptualization of a Successful Leader

When asked about their idea of a successful leader, the study participants identified a transformational leader as someone who is able to listen, share, and take risks for the sake of others. They stated that successful leaders can articulate a preferred and needed future, mobilize the necessary resources, sustain energy

and motivation of people, and showcase the results of individual and group outcomes in achieving the desired goals. A self-confident individual with clinical expertise was also identified as someone who moves the profession forward. The study participants also characterized a successful leader as an individual who sets goals and accomplishes them, brings colleagues with them on the journey, uses power in the service of others, advances the profession of those with whom they work, and never forgets that she is also a bedside clinician. Leaders must be secure individuals who can "pass the torch" to develop leadership skills in others.[6,21] The leaders' responses depict leadership as a process in which group members work together to foster transformation.[2,3,5,13]

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Uncovering the Environment for Success

When asked what or whom was present in their environment that allowed them to achieve their level of success, the leaders acknowledged supportive faculty, visionary colleagues, mentors, financial resources, and organizations that hold high expectations for productivity. The support and unconditional love given by their family, the presence of strong female family role models, and their individual perseverance toward accomplishing goals allowed these leaders to achieve success. The leaders stated that they altered their environment for success by seeking out supportive atmospheres, finding creative ways to convince others that the current situation was not working, discovering a better way to initiate the task, and fostering relationships with staff at all organizational levels. These leaders created opportunities for success with other organizations, took risks to achieve their goals, built international and national collegial relationships, were willing to immerse themselves in the environment, and set goals and achieved them.

Confronting Transformation

The leaders confront change with a clear vision on how to move the group forward.[12] Change was conceptualized as an unfolding process that leads to a deeper understanding. The leaders generally seek employment in organizations with value systems congruent to the ones that they profess. When the environment becomes unsupportive, the leaders use humor; stop and reorganize the environment; find out who has power; thrive on dealing with the present environment by creating something new; introduce an idea with a history of success to build credibility with collaborators; and if all else fails, they acknowledge the futility of continuing their efforts and leave the harmful environment. The leaders overcome roadblocks and persist with optimism, which is a common trait of successful leaders.[21] In these leaders' responses, change was generally viewed as a

friend rather than an enemy. Since progress cannot continue without struggle, change must occur to shape the environment for success.[23]

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Antecedents for Success

When asked what in their life seemed to make the difference for their leadership success, the leaders named the following influences: supportive friends, spouses, and colleagues. Being conscious of their work, intelligent, high-achievers, exposed to bright people, able to say no, outgoing and inquisitive, not afraid to take risks, and able to find success anywhere also contributed to the leaders' success. Perseverance, ambition, and courage seemed to direct the leaders down the path of success.[21,24]

Espoused Colleagues

The transformational leaders enjoy interacting with individuals who are honest, trustworthy, creative, experimental, skilled clinicians, visionary, energetic, optimistic, and humorous. The leaders appreciate others who have similar interests as them, display actions congruent with their espoused beliefs, question assumptions, appreciate the best in everyone, are not egotistical, and maintain a positive attitude. The leaders stated that they interact with people who are intelligent, articulate, energetic, critical thinkers, responsive, and caring. The types of people these leaders enjoy being around possess similar qualities as that of a transformational leader.[5-7,24]

Autonomy or Collaboration

When asked whether the leaders worked better independently or with others, the majority stated that they enjoyed being autonomous. Autonomy can be advantageous or detrimental to transformational leadership because it can foster creativity but at the same time negate group connectedness.[5] The leaders prefer initiating the task independently and then collaborating with others when implementing the change. One leader explained that she collaborates with those who will be affected by the change before implementing the plan of action to gain greater insight and ensure success. The leaders find their collaborators where they work, in the community, or in those they handpick for the task. Leaders described their preferred collaborators as productive, "can do," high-achieving individuals.

Process of Change

When the leaders experience change, they focus on the process of change by understanding new possibilities, talking about the change process, instilling basic survival skills, organizing the environment, prioritizing the needs, involving others in the transformation, searching for a deeper meaning, and managing their time. After the leaders experience the initial shock of change, they focus on the long-term goals and develop strategies to minimize the downside of change and maximize the future.

These transformational leaders often take risks to position themselves as positive change agents, decide where they want to go with the new idea, continually gather and assess information, learn how to win the support needed to make the change, and work to sustain the high-quality outcome of the transformation. As one leader stated: "It is better to ask for forgiveness than permission when it comes to taking action." Some leaders use a straightforward, concrete, reality-oriented change strategy that reaches others intellectually and emotionally. The leaders emphasized that providing information is not usually enough to initiate and sustain change. A leader must consider another's belief systems and work toward changing attitudes that ultimately create a new culture in the environment. Transformational leaders are skilled in a variety of communication and motivational approaches that inspire others to surpass expectations. The leaders perceive change as a dynamic construct that is more productive when implemented with a strong vision and compelling purpose.[21,23]

Professional Dilemmas

When the leaders were asked about some of the crises of their professional life, most respond with a brief summary of the crises and what impact they had on their career. Most leaders had resolved the conflicts or were currently working to solve the problems. The leaders who had resolved the conflicts stated that they had personally and professionally grown from the experience. The leaders responded to a crisis by resolving the issue, attaining good resolution, and moving forward. Transformational leaders embrace ambiguity with integrity, self-control, and courage so that they can resolve the conflict and continue in their pursuit for greatness.[2,5,12]

Elements of Success

Factors that contributed most to the leaders' success as a researcher, teacher, and/or consultant included a good work ethic, commitment to getting the job finished, being in the right place at the right time, spousal support and encouragement, a love for others, longevity in jobs, a striving for high achievement, and having the ability to focus. Having the ability to manifest a sense of responsibility, share ideas and critique written work with colleagues, never compromise core values and beliefs, be open-minded with exciting visions, and learn from the feedback obtained from trustful people also contributed to the leaders' success. A support person with a strong scientific background, student comments that have provided the impetus for change, possessing a sense of self-awareness, and being willing to be a "cerebral Olympian" or life-long learner were other factors that contributed to the leaders' success. These factors emulate what is found in the literature.[2,5,13,15]

Thriving Environments

The most successful environments for the leaders include colleagues with similar interests and personalities, a visionary who trusts that the leader knows how to make the vision a reality, a high level of support systems to delegate tasks, and tangible rewards. Order, undisturbed quiet time, time and freedom for creativity, a physically comfortable environment, opportunities

for humor and playfulness, trustworthy individuals, and the latest technology were other elements of a successful environment. The leaders also named easy access to all main sources of information, a great level of autonomy, and clinically oriented individuals as other qualities of an ideal environment.

Pathway to Success

When asked who played a monumental part in their success, the majority of leaders stated that they had inadvertently fallen into success. The success began with a strong desire to improve a particular aspect of nursing care. After the leaders defined their area of interest, they began to find themselves surrounded with opportunities to promote their idea. For some leaders, negative people taught them how "not to be" and directed them to a more affirming, nurturing, and optimistic personal style. Few leaders stated that they had a mentor; however, the ones that did described their mentor as a highly intelligent, articulate, unselfish, life-long learner with a deep sense of responsibility who was always searching for the highest level of excellence. An effective mentor provides protégés with support and guidance, exposing them to creative ways of knowing.[15]

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Forecasting the Future

When the leaders were asked about what they anticipate will be the most important changes in the field of nursing during the next 20 years, some interesting visions emerged. Three of the 8 leaders interviewed believed that in 20 years the nursing profession will loose ground as a credible profession, remain in a state of crisis, and stand at the crossroads of its own development as a profession. Other leaders provided an optimistic outlook of the future, believing that positive changes in the nursing profession will occur during the next 20 years, including a baccalaureate or master's entry-level degree; a broadening of the clinical nurse primary provider role; and a virtual learning community linked with technology of the latest research, best practices, and peer consulting for instantaneous access from anywhere. Leaders predicted that nurse and managed organizations will employ most of the nurses and contract them out to people and institutions that need services, that individual nurses will manage cohorts of patients through the life-span from setting to setting, and that the nurse's assistant will be replaced with a robot programmed to be compatible with the nurse's personality and skill needs. During the next 20 years, leaders projected that nurses will be an integral part of health care on the space station and in new planet colonization, that clinical nursing research will be an integral part of mainstream well-funded health care research and development initiatives, and that disease prevention and health promotion will be a major practice because of the preventing or curing of chronic illness by genetic research. It was foreseen that there will be an emergence in private duty nurses who will accompany their clients to the hospital and community settings because of public demand for quality nursing care. Nursing leaders predicted that the tremendous advances in technology will enable nurses to be more efficient but also challenge the nurturing aspect of nursing care. A technologic approach to health care may draw individuals into nursing who are less interested in providing a holistic caring environment and more interested in the technologic challenges nursing will have to offer. Other visions for the future include more individuals from diverse backgrounds being recruited into nursing, resulting in a change in public perception of nursing; roles between the professional nurse and "other" nursing roles will be clarified; most professional nursing care will be found outside the hospital and focused on health promotion; and nursing will begin to be viewed as a discipline that supports and respects each member.

CONCLUSION

These 8 nursing leaders recognized by their profession exhibit the qualities described as necessary to be a transformational leader. The leaders interviewed had several commonalities that contributed to their successful careers. They all strive for excellence in whatever they seek to accomplish. The leaders are self-confident, intelligent, inquisitive, and deeply value high-quality endeavors. Integrity was an essential virtue found in all of the transformational leaders. The leaders do not compromise their core values or beliefs and consistently uphold ethical principals. Transformational leaders recognize the association between quality and value and create efficient ways to maintain integrity.[4,6,7,21] The leaders have shaped their environment for success by finding ways to attain their visions and then tenaciously pursuing them.[5,9,21] Transformational leaders are perseverant in their desire to remain current in practice, maintain job expertise, mobilize resources, and engage in life-long learning. The leaders attempt to improve the lives of others by advocating for their rights.[3,5,17,21] They find pleasure in empowering others and possess a genuine love for people that ignites a passion for improving a certain aspect of nursing care. They are inspirational motivators who use creative ways to accomplish their dreams. The leaders inspire others to help make their dream a reality, continue working toward the goal, and remain faithful to the chosen endeavor. Transformational leaders appeal to a sense of enjoyment and purpose, which makes the journey an enlightening experience.[21] The leaders are creative inventors of the future who are consistently striving to advance their mission.[3,5,6,8] They are visionaries who can articulate their aspirations to others, innovatively create the future, and energetically mobilize others around their desired goals. The leaders maintain a shared path toward self-discovery by eliciting strengths in others, enabling others to make decisions, and empowering others to become leaders. As for themselves, the leading artists in nursing have designed, shaped, and molded their future. They know that without risk, success is improbable.

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The knowledge gained from the interviews with transformational nursing leaders can provide insight into the future of nursing leadership. Transformational leadership has the power to produce future generations of successful leaders who, in concert with others, have the ability to create effective solutions to some of the profession's most pressing issues. ■

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