

Top Ten Questions: *Transitioning From the CNO Position*

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In this time of great innovation and change in health care, a chief nursing officer (CNO) may leave this role for a variety of opportunities and circumstances. This article describes com-

mon considerations when shifting away from this nursing leadership position and offers key strategies to positively navigate this significant career transition.

As any CNO will attest, the work and circumstances around a senior nursing leadership position are complex and dynamic. Due to changes internal to an organization, a myriad of forces in the external environment, or a combination of the two, leaders are continuously transforming their approaches to leading. Organizations are no longer stagnant, nor are the strategies and members of leadership teams. Additionally, consultants, technologies, and diverse collaborative teams contribute to the ongoing leadership complexities, challenges and successes. As a nurse leader considers this common career transition from the CNO position, many questions may arise. This article seeks to highlight some of the major questions posed when contemplating or actually transitioning from the CNO role. Strategies to manage through this transition are offered. Many of these strategies may be applicable by nurse leaders at any level.

1. WHAT NEEDS TO OCCUR BEFORE I MOVE AWAY FROM THE CNO POSITION?

Leaving the CNO position and role may be anticipated such as with retirement or a leader's decision to move to another position. Unplanned transition may occur due to illness, merger, executive realignment, or other circumstances. In all situations, the CNO's accountability for nursing care and technical leadership continues until it is handed off. For nurse executives, transition of this accountability to another capable nurse is required by accreditation and regulatory bodies, and is imperative when a nurse leader moves away from the professional and personal aspects of the role. An associate in the nursing division of the organization or other capable nurse leader will serve as the next CNO, whether interim or permanent. Once this successor is identified, handing over the technical accountability is a natural stepping-off point in transitioning from the role. This allows executives to focus on other professional and personal considerations as they move toward their "next step"—their new reality as a nurse and leader.

Strategy: Develop and implement a transition plan with specific objectives and timelines.

2. WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO NEXT?

This is a very common question when sharing your job change story with friends, family, coworkers, colleagues, and people you meet. If a future position has been determined, the answer is quite simple. When a future position is not known, however, the question becomes more challenging to answer. Many will ask whether you are staying within the same organization or not. If so, the new role compared with the CNO role is quite easily explained. Organizational mission, vision, and values provide context. If you are leaving an organization and a future position has not been determined, the same question may become more difficult to answer. You may or may not want to remain in a similar role with the same level of responsibility. A desirable position may or may not be available immediately.

Retirement may be an option, whether leaving the role is planned or unplanned. Sanford¹ wrote about nurse leader colleagues and their thoughts as they near retirement. Among

other things, Sanford wrote, "They speak about how they will miss the professional roles that they have considered a major part of their identities." She reported that many who vacate executive or management positions will continue in part-time roles that continue to serve others.¹

When discussing retirement, a common understanding of the meaning of retirement should be established. Retiring from a position or organization is a very different transition than retiring from a profession/career/calling. Many friends, colleagues, family members, and others have different beliefs, assumptions, and expectations around what constitutes "retirement." They may be unaware of the myriad part-time roles that an experienced nurse leader may assume.

People may ask if you are considering changing careers. Dow and Dow² posted a series of blogs on preparing for a significant career change after age 50. They describe options for "career transition" and "career transformation." A change of industries, work culture, or size or type of firm may be desired, while continuing with a similar function. Or transition from a primary discipline to another field or function may be preferred. In contemplating these career alternatives, consider personal knowledge and skills that are transferrable to other industries or another area of specific focus within health care. Training, retraining, professional development, or formal continued education may be necessary to accomplish a career transformation if one chooses to move a totally new career direction.

Strategy: Think ahead and have a "script" ready for responding to questions about why you are leaving and what you plan to do. If complete retirement is not desired, create an inventory of career options; begin to prioritize types of work and organizations of interest. Remain open to creative options and opportunities. Consider hiring an executive coach who specializes in transitions.

3. WHO AM I, REALLY?

With the decision or opportunity to move out of the CNO or leadership role, a break from the focus needed in the previous role provides time for reflection and insight. The leader is no longer defined by their professional role and title. Bridges³ was one of the earliest writers to explore the transition process in great detail. He studied critical changes including work-life transitions in his classic early work. Within one transition concept Bridges described as "disidentification," he stated, "In breaking old connections to the world, the person loses ways of self-identification." He continued, "One way or another, most people in transition have the experience of not being quite sure who they are anymore." (From *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes* by William Bridges, copyright © 1980. Reprinted by permission of Da Capo Press, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.)³

So "who am I?" and questions such as "what do I really like to do" can be common points of deliberation during career transition. Each person is a unique constellation of skills, knowledge, experiences, accomplishments, and insights. No 2 experienced nursing leaders have followed the same path across their careers. Taking an inventory of significant career achievements, education, professional development,

leadership assessments, accomplishments, and relationships including a thorough review of the leader's resume and curriculum vitae (CV) is often a fruitful exercise.

Investing in this comprehensive review of achievements outside the context of a specific leadership position may yield interesting insights. Some themes outlining strengths are often quite apparent, and others that are more hidden may emerge. For example, repeated successes in reorganization or new program startup may be appreciated. In addition, unique strengths, when considered outside the context of a specific position and organization, may prompt awareness and build creative connections about potential future career opportunities. The leader should invest the time to identify seemingly unrelated accomplishments, stories, experiences, projects, accountabilities, and leadership successes as opportunities to shape the future.

Examination of nurse leader/executive competencies from professional nursing organizations may assist in completing the "who am I" exercise, rounding out a more full picture of possibilities for the future. Innovative thoughts and possibilities may surface; prospects for future employment outside of nursing and health care may also be appreciated. Colleagues who have known the leader over time, such as current or past work associates, peers, mentors, and close professional collaborators are in an informed position to highlight strengths and weaknesses. They may provide additional insight to give the nurse leader a full, honest, and balanced picture of "who I am."

Strategy: Update resume and curriculum vitae as needed. Prepare an inventory of key personal and professional experiences that define *you*. Include skills and abilities you may have developed or used in arenas outside the workplace. In today's market, a robust LinkedIn page is critical.

4. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO NEXT?

In the discernment process outlined just above, alignment between what you really *like* to do and what you really *want* to do should be emerging. In a 2017 guest editorial by nationally known nurse leaders Bacheller and Shaffer,⁴ they explored planned and unplanned transitions. They contend that "the key to a lifetime of probable transitions is the everlasting network of professional colleagues and friends you create over the course of your professional career. In addition, the invaluable lessons learned from previous work experiences and past hardships contribute in unimaginable ways, laying the framework for future success."⁴ The greatest rewards in past positions and across a professional career should be structured into the future. Portions of past work may create opportunities to innovate; new opportunities may emerge. Or perhaps professional activities that have not been accomplished to date in a career are desired options in the future.

For accomplished leaders, there are many opportunities to meld a number of part-time positions, in practice, education/professional development, research, quality and patient safety, management, professional writing, consulting, and leadership into a unique portfolio. A constellation of various

types of work may be the perfect personal and professional match. Bringing key pieces of knowledge and expertise into future work will be critical in finding a "fit" as an individual, a team member and as a leader. Eventually, finding organizational mission/vision/values that match individual values, utilize key talents, and offer personal preferences in work and leadership will surface.

In Molinaro's⁵ 2018 writing about leadership, he discussed workforce transformation and growth. He described the final lesson in his personal leadership story: "Don't waste your time in an organization that doesn't deserve your investment." Remembering a senior manager who early in his career identified his leadership potential, Molinaro recalls the manager's words to him: "You aren't just investing your time or your career—you're investing your life."⁵ So be certain that the type of continued work you choose is what you want to do so your authentic leadership can shine thorough.

Strategy: Create thought lists of personal and professional contacts, organizations, corporations, position titles, and topics/issues to consider for the next position(s). Seek opportunities to meet new contacts who may offer unique perspectives and identify new areas of work, or connect you with organizations you would not have otherwise considered.

5. WHAT ARE LEADING EDGE TOPICS IN NURSING AND HEALTH CARE THAT I WANT TO EXPLORE AND LEARN MORE ABOUT?

Emerging opportunities in patient care, education, population health, data use, technology innovations, or other areas may be of interest. The nurse leader may possess knowledge and skills to uniquely influence team problem-solving and cross-pollination, artificial intelligence, and technology development. These could create new ideas and solutions to improve nursing practice, self-care, access to care, safety, and other desired future state conditions for nurses, patients, or the health care industry.

Strategy: Review current electronic and print media using key terms and search functions to readily connect with cutting-edge people, products, and organizations. Reaching out to connect with these contacts will test whether there is a fit for your interests and skills in the evolution of health care and related fields.

6. WHO ARE THE INDIVIDUALS WHO KNOW ME WELL, CAN BE SUPPORTIVE DURING A TRANSITION AND ENCOURAGING AS I MOVE FORWARD?

An accessible support system to be a listener, a sounding board, an encourager, and at times, a challenger is critical to career transitions whether planned or unplanned. A network of key individuals who know you well, including personal and professional coaches, mentors, personal counselors, clergy, select immediate or extended family members, friends, and other nurse leaders should be identified. Colleagues who have undergone a major career transition can provide exceptional support. If the career transition is planned, letting go and moving forward thoughtfully may challenge even the

best leaders. In unplanned career transitions, additional challenges and many unanswered questions related to future employment will impact the leader and their family structure. Financial considerations may quickly become a challenge for some. An administrative assistant who knows you well may efficiently manage details that the leader has become accustomed to delegating.

Strategy: Reach out to your personal and professional network. If formal career transition assistance is available, reach out early and often to utilize the support and transition resources that are available. Consider hiring an “as needed” administrative assistant for support.

7. HOW CAN I REMAIN ENGAGED AND PROFESSIONALLY AWARE DURING THIS TRANSITION?

Professional organizations and other professional connections will keep the leader involved. Many venues and media are available, including conferences, webinars, informal networking meetings, professional reading, and attendance at formal professional organization meetings. New and renewed associations with nurse educators, online networking, periodic e-mail communication, or occasional text messages allow you to keep in touch with key professional colleagues. Many health care and community organizations welcome nurse leaders to serve in a volunteer capacity, ranging from hands-on productive work for the organization or agency to service at the board level.

Strategy: Attend professional meetings and webinars. Pursue networking contacts and meet select individuals. Utilize social media and other electronic connections with peers and colleagues. Selectively approach new contacts; ask for a brief meeting to learn about them including their organization, role and professional network. Explore professional and charitable organizations.

8. WOULD I CONSIDER RELOCATING OR NOT?

This important question will drive the breadth of the job search for a leader. Personal circumstances or personal preferences may prevent relocating. To fully explore this question, consideration should be given to the many facets of work and leadership that can be accomplished using distance tools and technologies without relocating. If distance work has not been experienced along a career path, a true understanding of the job expectations, tools, pace of work, and means to be effective while working remotely may be in order. Many leaders and executives are engaging in long-distance commuting as an effective alternative to relocation. Depending upon the employer, work culture, and the leadership accountabilities of a given position, relocation may or may not be required. A job search in the location of residence is certainly common, but should not be considered an absolute. Keep your options open to opportunities that originate from outside your immediate location, even if you believe you cannot or do not want to relocate.

Strategy: Explore job boards of nurse and nurse leader professional organizations, health care organizations, companies

of interest, educational institutions, and other digital job match sites. Maintain contact with your network. Look at practical issues such as cost of living and housing in other markets.

9. WHAT BALANCE AM I SEEKING IN FUTURE WORK AND THE REST OF MY LIFE?

At a career transition point, an evaluation of life-work balance to promote health and well-being affirms the professional commitment to bring your best effort to future work while remaining committed to non-work-life obligations. Given an opportunity to rebalance, the leader needs to be honest about what is ideal. Setting boundaries to promote balance of time spent at work and with family members, friends, and colleagues is discussed by several national nurse leaders in interviews published by Sanford in 2017.⁶ Being honest with yourself about achieving balance to maintain an optimum level of self-care in the future will enhance future performance and promote resilience. As a nurse leader, you are probably able to do many things and serve a variety of needs; however, choose those issues that will move you through this transition phase.

Strategy: Inventory time spent on employment requirements, professional activities, travel, personal and professional development, family obligations, personal friendships, physical activity, reflection, leisure time activities, and relaxation. Deliberately adjust this balance to achieve desired collective life goals. Choose future positions and professional commitments that support this desired equilibrium.

10. HOW DO I PREPARE TO ENTER THE WORLD OF SEARCHING FOR AND LANDING A NEW POSITION?

Determining how to search for a position may be foreign to some nurse leaders. Often, nurse leaders have risen through the ranks in an organization and seeking a position has been limited to internal processes. When searching for a position in a new organization, a number of approaches may be taken. Typically, updating your resume and CV comes to mind initially.

Updating these summaries to include skills and experiences can create a strong foundation to begin the job search, and similar information may be required using multiple media. Posts to electronic job boards, professional networking posts, job applications submissions, and attachments such as cover letters draw on the information, experiences, key achievements, and skills listed on the resume and CV. In the past, the resume was known as the gold standard for landing that next position. Today, however, digital applications and professional networking applications connect job seekers with available jobs. The stellar resume in and of itself is *not* the activity that will land the new position. However, it provides a comprehensive collection of information to support networking activities.

Strategy: Maximize professional digital connections and reach out to your professional network. If a suitable position is not immediately available, cultivating long-standing and new relationships expands the possibility that desired work will be attained, whether a portfolio of work or a full-time leadership position is the desired next step. Share your resume

or digital connection information with colleagues in follow-up to a conversation. This information can then be forwarded to key individuals in your colleague's network.

CONCLUSION

Leaving the CNO position is a significant career transition, whether planned or unplanned. When this or similar nurse leader career transitions are anticipated or realized, the questions and strategies discussed here provide a beginning dialogue to embark on the path to another professional commitment. **NL**

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Note: Mary J. Brown would like to recognize the support and suggestions offered by Shawn Harrell, RN, MS, in the preparation and submission of this manuscript. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

1541-4612/2019/ \$ See front matter
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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2018.08.004>