

An Executive Leadership Journey

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Leadership journeys are rarely exactly how you planned and envisioned them. The 1 constant thread, however, is relationship building. Leaders, in fact, are only as good as their relationships, no matter a person's title, stage in life, or moment in time. Within these relationships, it is key to understand the importance of timing and how best to get buy-in. Throughout the lifetime of a leadership career, it is critical to hold your mission close. It might not make decisions easier but will make them clearer. At the end of the day, all you truly have is your integrity. Keep it close.

GETTING STARTED IN NURSING LEADERSHIP

Like many people getting started in their nursing careers, I thought I knew exactly what I wanted to do and how I was going to get there. Life, of course, had other plans, and my career did not follow a traditional path. When I first began my career, I practiced as an LPN in the Burn Center at Kansas University Hospital, and I loved it. I had no interest in anything but patient care. Serving the profession at the national level wasn't on my radar. However, I quickly learned the tremendous value that leadership skills added to the quality of care I was able to provide to patients and their families who relied on me.

In my 20-year-old mind, it was relatively simple. You needed to be respectful of all people, follow through on commitments made to colleagues, and be willing to help in the provision of care as needed—role modeling that the “patient comes first.” In essence, humility, respect, and a firm recognition that every member of the team was essential to optimal care delivery, became the foundation of my leadership style that would evolve over time. Adding to this foundation, I discovered that a strong sense of humor and being open to understanding the human condition, as hard as it is to comprehend, is the

bridge that connects patients and providers. To that end, leaders are as only as good as their relationships, no matter a person's title, stage in life, or moment in time. I believed and tried to live servant leadership before I knew it had a name. Five short years after earning my ADN and BSN, I became the head nurse of the burn center where I started. I set out to serve and support all providers by making their work environment one in which they could thrive and, in turn, provide the best care to patients.

With an interest in working in children's health care, I moved to Children's Mercy Kansas City, where I spent the next 30 years. Being fortunate to recognize early on that your reputation, relationships, and visible impact on care were drivers in advancing your career, I quickly rose through the leadership ranks, holding positions such as nursing supervisor, nurse manager, and hematology/oncology service line director. At the same time, I felt that I would soon stall in my progress if I did not continue my education. After completing my MSN, I was promoted to vice president of patient care services and chief nursing officer (CNO). Although my title reflected my leadership capacity, I knew that my knowledge quest was still in its infancy. I had heard about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Executive Nurse Leader program. After a competitive selection process, I was thrilled to be accepted. This program was nothing short of transformational. Nursing leaders from academia, practice, industry, and policy came together to grow together. The program was a fellowship: a network of trusted friends and mentors that lifted me up and challenged me to be my best. What I gained from this program was unmistakable—be reliable, be authentic, be a life-long learner. It was no surprise that I decided to pursue my PhD, focused on work environments.

KEY POINTS

- **Focusing on providing the best care and outcomes for patients and their families is the foundation of what you do.**
- **Relationship-building and inclusiveness of all stakeholders (patients/family/colleagues/care providers) is key.**
- **A desire to have a positive impact on health care is realized by an eagerness to learn, being open to opportunities, and a willingness to lead.**

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS A CNO

In 2001, I became aware of the Magnet Recognition Program® while attending an AONE conference, and I was inspired. It was a program that married my research and passion—the importance of a strong work environment. I knew the course was clear, the team at Children’s Mercy must strive for excellence. I pitched the idea to my leadership council assuming everyone would see the value, and it would be as they say, a “no brainer.” Turns out I was wrong. They initially saw it as just another certification and extra work. So, I embraced a key tenet of leadership, time. I asked the leadership team to review the Magnet standards and meet a month later to discuss. One of the comments I received in support of the program at the follow-up meeting was, “We do a lot of this anyway, why wouldn’t we go for it?”

Two years later, in 2003, we became the 66th hospital to receive Magnet designation, the first in Missouri and the region. Children’s Mercy was an early adopter, and it has retained its Magnet status continually, to this day. After this incredible success of striving for better patient care through better nursing work environments, I knew my leadership path must continue. In 2007, I was promoted to executive vice president and co-chief operating officer, and ultimately chief operating officer (COO). This role was a part of the executive leadership team at the health system. It was not about my credentials (although it validated my clinical experience), it was about my impact. My impact on patient care, my ability to lead teams, drive change, and put into action the values of the organization. This is leadership—working with a team, being open to listening, and dating back to my first days on the burn unit, respect and humility.

I am proud and grateful for several accomplishments I achieved while there that had significant impact on the organization, the community, the families, and each patient. I helped usher in Lean Leadership; drive quality measures with incredible, measurable impact; and champion family-centered care.

I am also most proud of the accomplishments that were based on a firm recognition of the social determinants of health (SDH). A person’s zip code is a strong predictor of their health. During my time at Children’s Mercy, I was able to partner with the community formally and informally to design programs and create opportunities to mitigate SDH, which is the future of health care in this country—driving toward health equity and championing individualized wellness. From the National Institutes of Health to the National Academy of Medicine’s Committee on the *Future of Nursing 2020–2030* and in health care systems across the country, I am energized by the opportunity ahead to make significant change on SDHs. Nursing will be vital to ushering in that new direction.

THE DECISION TO PURSUE A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF NURSING

When you are open to them, opportunities are endless. Yet, we must make difficult decisions, based on what we value, and prioritize where we will spend our precious time. I was inducted into the American Academy of Nursing in 2005 and made the decision to be active in the organization. At first, as it is for many, induction into the Academy is a bellwether moment in your career. A committee of accomplished nursing leaders evaluates your application to determine whether you have made a sustainable impact to health and health care. When you get that letter, the one that designates you as a fellow of the American Academy of Nursing (FAAN), it is powerful. That power, the power of the fellowship, is awe-inspiring, and I knew for me, I could not let this moment end at the celebration. I would not simply sit on the sidelines and pay my dues to keep a credential. FAAN is so much more than 4 letters. It is a recognition that nursing has the collective power to impact health, drive change, and move mountains. FAAN is the recognition that we lead and we lead together. Therefore, I was intentional in the pursuit of my leadership roles at the Academy, because this organization deserved my precious time, and I am honored to provide it.

We know that leadership positions are not simply bestowed upon us. They are gained through the demonstration of our commitment, the results we achieve, and as I have mentioned before, the relationships we build. So I became involved, I demonstrated my commitment, my passion for this amazing organization. Prior to being elected president-elect, I held other roles. I served as an expert panel co-chair on the nominating committee, and chair of the conference planning committee. I was honored to be elected as board secretary, serving 2 terms.

Serving in each of these roles gave me great perspective. This organization is destined for greatness, not because we are individuals who have accomplished amazing things, but because at the core of all of us is our innate commitment to improving the human condition. Sometimes passion can cloud direction and strategy. At the Academy, we have no shortage of passionate fellows. That is why those who serve in leadership roles, on our committees, as expert panels, and most importantly on our board, must never forget that in order for us to drive change, we must have a clear focus and a strong strategy. When I became president, and even prior to that, we struggled, as an organization, with impact. We didn’t have a clear path on how to define it, how to measure it, and how to improve our structures to achieve this end. I am proud to say that at the start of 2019, the board of directors became incredibly purposeful in this quest. However, this means change.

The Academy's secretary, Dr. Mary Foley, often shares a cartoon. Essentially, it is a group of individuals with their hands raised and the character at the podium asking, "Who wants change?" In the next frame, the same character asks, "Who wants to lead change?" Not a single hand is raised. If I were an artist, I would redraw the second frame and include myself, with my hand raised. For 10 years, I have seen change at the Academy ushered in by incredible past presidents. I am privileged to be the president of the Academy, as we evolve again to further drive measurable impact. In my humble opinion, the Academy is just getting started, and I will continue to serve this organization, even when I no longer have a formal leadership position.

TAKING THE POSITION AS PRESIDENT OF CHAMBERLAIN UNIVERSITY

Three things drew me to this position. First, the diversity of the campus-based BSN program. In 2018, 49% of pre-licensure students were from diverse backgrounds. As you know, this is important because the nursing profession does not yet reflect the demographics of the population we serve. Second, the BSN program is the largest in the country, graduating nearly 2,482 pre-licensure students in 2017 to 2018, and having more than 63,000 alumni worldwide. The weight of this responsibility is not lost on my team nor myself. Because we are educating a large segment of nurses, we must be incredibly diligent to ensure we provide excellence in every encounter, so they may succeed. The health of the nation depends on the quality of our graduates. They will provide care in the most remote, rural areas and the most densely populated areas of our country. If we prepare them to be mindful, passionate, and highly educated, then we have helped these communities.

This brings me to my third reason for taking this position, the Chamberlain Care Student Success Model. It is radically different from how nursing education occurs in most places. Chamberlain University spends a great deal of time at the admission stage to best understand where each student is at from an academic standpoint. We also assess their needs and readiness so that we can determine the best way to support them as individuals. Many of our students are first-generation college students who also work full-time. Many have family responsibilities, as well. We take all of that into account when charting their academic path.

At Chamberlain, I am fortunate to work with a committed mission-driven team and a strong board of trustees who are well-regarded in the nursing and health care communities. They go the extra mile to find innovative ways for our academic system to support all the needs of our students so they can overcome whatever barriers they face and be successful. And although success is individually defined, I firmly believe that Chamberlain has embraced this philosophy, and I am

honored to be a part of a university that wants to break the mold and be an agent for meaningful change.

LESSON LEARNED IN LEADERSHIP

There have been many lessons learned along the way, but 2 have been foundational for me, and I share them with nurses as they move into leadership positions. Both pieces of guidance are important as you try to stay true to your personal and professional values throughout your career.

First, at the end of the day, all you have is your integrity. A person of integrity is described as someone who is honest, trustworthy, and kind. They put others' needs ahead of their own. It is also described as a person whose moral compass never waivers.¹

Second, throughout my career, I have observed a subtle trap that has the potential to call a leader's integrity into question. This occurs as they accept roles and increasing responsibilities that come with an increase in salary. My advice is to remain humble and "live like a staff nurse."

You may be in a professionally rewarding position where you have sufficient autonomy and authority. This allows you to work with others in the organization to ensure that efficient and high-quality nursing care is provided. Then, suddenly something in the environment changes—a new chief executive officer and COO are hired, the financials of the organization become unfavorable, or a new board chair takes the organization in a different direction. These are not necessarily negative occurrences. In fact, they could be positive. However, you could be asked to make a major change that you know potentially could jeopardize quality, even threaten Magnet status.

If you are unable to successfully compromise with leadership, you need a plan B to ensure your integrity remains intact. You need to be able to leave a position knowing you can live on a lower salary, while looking for other opportunities. I am not suggesting you don't spend any of your newly found discretionary dollars, but rather make thoughtful decisions that ensure your ability to honor your values and ethics.

REFERENCE

1. Power of Positivity website. Available at: <http://www.powerofpositivity.com>. Accessed April 27, 2018.

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