

Reflection: A Powerful Leadership Tool

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Reflection is an important skill in the nurse executive's toolbox. It is integral to self-care, learning theory, and professional growth—all important aspects of sustaining cultures of care and fostering resiliency.

The ability to reflect has been linked to effective high performing leaders.¹ In an exploration of the tenure of 4 presidents of the United States, reflection was identified as a common trait.² Individually, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson employed different techniques to sustain themselves while in office. Lincoln wrote and rewrote his correspondence to relieve stress. Similarly, Franklin D. Roosevelt drafted and perfected his fireside chats. Their techniques are similar to the e-mail editing that occurs prior to hitting the send button—when emotions are high, and uncrafted communications are raw. Reflecting can assist the nurse executive leader to create thoughtful communications and avoid potentially damaging messages. It is a tool that consistently used allows the nurse executive to move forward through the demanding chaos of health care leadership.

THE POWER OF REFLECTION

The power of reflection has been identified as an important aspect of self-care, learning theory, and professional growth. Unlike a reflection when heat and light are not absorbed, professional reflection requires owning one's behaviors and consciously considering and analyzing them.³ The anticipated outcome of self-understanding serves as a platform from which to conduct our personal and professional lives. Reflection does not just yield opportunities for improvement. The practice of reflecting can also help strengthen the nurse executive's resolve and help acknowledge actions met with success. Reflection is a necessary practice and a powerful leadership tool.

SELF-CARE

Reflection has been assigned a "soft-skill" rating as those in leadership positions refute its necessity. Decisiveness by unwavering executives is often rewarded. For example, budget cuts and creative staffing may help meet metrics thus garnering accolades. However, when strict methods are employed to contain costs, whether it's exercising prudence on the quality or amount of supplies, or a "no-overtime" mandate, the margin of savings may narrow. Decisions of this nature,

made without reflection, can result in costly mistakes, that is, fines, lawsuits, and/or serious emotional angst.

It is not in these examples alone that reflection is beneficial. Relational executives, welcoming interactions with staff, may unintentionally invite stress. Often, direct reports seeking advice may unintentionally burden the nurse executive with their professional challenges or personal problems. This may cause a depletion of energy. Intentional reflection may be powerful enough to reverse the exhaustion this may cause.⁴

The reflective process is so powerful that some individuals advocate a regimented approach to its use. In the teaching of *The Practice*, a 3-step framework for living a peaceful, happy life, it is the third and last step.⁵ Part of the trilogy of waking up, living present, and letting go, reflection assists in releasing any challenges or successes of the day, with the understanding of tomorrow's opportunities. Perhaps the day was extremely difficult, perhaps it was extremely wonderful; by reflecting on the major events, lessons are identified, and the aware leader can incorporate them for future use. Consider the following, it "is not a judging exercise it is a notice exercise."^{5(p.119)}

Reflection is solidly embedded in the holistic nursing practice literature as an integral component of self-care.⁶⁻⁸ Applied to nurse executive leadership, its usefulness may be even more essential to assure the sustainment of cultures of care and resiliency. In a research study designed to understand the supporting elements of caring and resiliency, the practice of reflection emerged as a significant theme.⁹ The chief

KEY POINTS

- Reflection is a necessary practice and powerful leadership tool.
- Reflection is a powerful self-care initiative that can reverse emotional and physical exhaustion.
- Reflection allows the nurse leader to examine unconscious biases, core beliefs, and facilitates learning.

Box 1. Suggested Questions Assisting Reflection

Was I present for the people in my life today?
Did I make eye contact with those I spoke to?
How were my interactions with coworkers, friends, and families?
When she said X, I felt Y? I wonder why I felt that way.
Was my tone of voice appropriate for the audience I was addressing?
What unique value did I contribute today?
Was there anything I could have done differently today?

Developed from Reeves et al.¹⁴ and Schmidt.⁵

nursing officer participants voiced the use of reflection during and after experiences. They revealed its usefulness in reconciling the past and considered it an important work in anticipating the future.

An additional study conducted to determine the influence of engaging in *The Practice*, acute care leader participants supported a decrease in perceived stress.¹⁰ As the nurse leader participants engaged in the self-care activities outlined, they began incorporating them into their professional routine. They noted situational utilization and shared self-reflection in the form of journaling. The benefits of journaling are personal exploration, insight, and growth.¹ This type of reflection promotes leadership renewal and replenishment on a daily basis.

Some leaders may find it helpful to use structured questions as they learn to incorporate reflection in their lives. Suggested questions are included in [Box 1](#).

REFLECTIVE LEARNING THEORIES

There are 4 researchers credited with developing the theory of reflective learning. The basic tenants were identified by John Dewey in the early 1900s. The framework is predicated on the need for careful and thorough analysis of occurrence details, interventions, responses, and outcomes.¹¹ Similar to a modern day root-cause analysis, practicing reflection helps reveal contributory factors and alternative courses of action.

Donald Schön added applicability to this theory by differentiating between reflection in the moment and reflection that occurs retrospectively.¹¹ His model purports that the act of reflecting during the event builds an intervention repertoire that can be easily accessed by the nurse executive when similar situations occur.

Further development of this theory identifies a 4-step process to follow when reflecting.¹¹ Attributed to

David Kolb, the process includes the experience, the reflection, the learning, and the implementation of what was learned. Of interest is the notion that this process must occur in its entirety. If it does not occur with every event, then future leadership decision-making may be at risk.

Lastly, the fourth donor to reflective learning theory is David Boud.¹¹ He contributes the importance of understanding emotions in deciphering event outcomes. He proposed that emotions govern the recollection of event details and therefore impact the recollection of events. This is similar to the reckoning state of discovery described by Brown on the road to becoming resilient.¹² Reckoning is described as a process where one recognizes and understands emotional responses to certain events. Reckoning is accomplished through reflection, the insatiable ruminating to discover why certain situations evoke certain emotions. If reckoning does not occur, one's ability to be resilient may be jeopardized.

Repetitive use of specific steps when reflecting can help imprint this important leadership skill.¹³ Understanding emotions, analyzing setbacks, and recognizing behaviors forces leaders to think about possibilities, differing opinions, and explorations of alternative approaches to problem-solving.

LEADERSHIP GROWTH

Consistent reflection requires leaders to learn and practice a new skill. Additionally, it requires time, a luxury executives often do not have enough of. Leaders are often unwilling participants in reflection because it requires them to slow down and give in to their curiosity.³ Logically minded leaders may wonder what the return on investment is for them. Reflection is touted as the single most important skill in the leadership toolbox.¹⁴ It allows the nurse executive to examine unconscious biases, core beliefs, and facilitates learning. It reinforces the importance of getting it right the first and/or subsequent times.

Nurse executives need not worry about disconnecting from their responsibilities to reflect. Reflection is their responsibility. Solutions reveal themselves to quiet minds. Imagine if the details of executing a strategic plan were revealed during time spent exploring, noticing, and reflecting.

The power of reflection allows the nurse executive an opportunity to notice the day's events—both challenges and successes. Perspective gained as a passive observer creates a different reality, one perhaps never considered without the opportunity. The act of reflecting gives permission for a "particular way of appreciating, learning from, and working with whatever happens in everyday life."^{15(p.5)} It is a powerful leadership tool.

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1541-4612/2019/\$ See front matter

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nml.2019.01.004>