Leadership has become an increasingly complicated concept to define, describe, and certainly to demonstrate, given the complex and increasingly demanding systems in which most of us work. However, that is not for a lack of books on the subject. Most have interesting titles, are well written, full of engaging stories, and contain the requisite number of "crucial" principles that are meant to inspire. Almost all focus on the leader as the one responsible for setting the vision, leading the charge, inspiring and motivating those in the organization, executing the plan, and evaluating the outcomes. Yet, in a world looking more like a kaleidoscope than a fixed landscape, in which organizational survival depends on collaboration, linkages, partnerships, and results, this is a tall order.

Three writers I have read recently bring some new insights to the topic of leadership that I have found enlightening and thought Nursing Outlook readers might as well. These authors bring a slightly different perspective on the varied dimensions of leadership. Their premises are simple:

- Nursing leaders are made (shaped) not born
- "Followership" is just as important as strong leadership in any effective organization
- Chief executive officers must develop senior leadership teams that share the responsibility for leadership in an ever changing environment

**Developing Nurse Leaders**

"People pay attention to you if you act as they should....’ask and you shall receive’ requires you ask in the first place." McBride’s book on leadership, The Growth and Development of Nurse Leaders, is especially timely given the generational gap between those nearing retiring in unprecedented numbers and individuals who are in the beginning and middle of their career. McBride addresses a number of important developmental issues for young men and women in nursing embarking on a career path in which their accomplishments earmark them for leadership. The chapters on “Learning to Be Taken Seriously”, “Sustaining Optimism and Managing Anger”, “The Vision Thing”, and “Choosing Excellence” are 4 of my favorites. The interweaving of historical events (eg, feminism) that clearly influenced nursing as a profession, with contemporary leadership literature, lays the foundation for cogent advice about the day-to-day realities for individuals thrust into leadership positions. The book encourages young leaders to be aware of and develop their inner self, as well plan critical career “moves” and milestones. And the list of “Top 10 Changes in Nursing in the last 50 years” clearly documents our strengths and accomplishments as a profession of leaders who have, as individuals and as a collective, done some extraordinary things in a relatively short period of time.
Followership

“Emerging literature on leadership-followership suggests that effective leaders and effective followers share many of the same characteristics and that cultivating followership skills is a prerequisite for effective leadership.” Followership is a unique concept I gave little thought to before reading this article. Austin defines followership as the ability of individuals in an organization to enact their jobs competently and in a proactive fashion, as well as support the efforts of their leader’s vision and initiatives. Austin’s premise is that effective followership is as essential to an organization as inspirational leadership. In his study of 302 senior level executives, the participants believed that these 2 roles (leadership and followership) were inextricably interrelated, that knowledge and skills of “followership” could be learned and that, together, leaders and followers could do much to improve morale, satisfaction, and productivity of work groups. But Austin makes the point that the concept of followership is often associated with characteristics often viewed negatively, such as passivity, inability to make judgments, and low status. There is a strong assumption in many work environments that leaders are never followers. And it is a fact that the hierarchical structures of most organizations discourage open dialogue and fluidity of roles and actions needed to respond to dynamic forces in most work environments.

Senior Leadership Teams

“…And so we cling to the myth of the lone ranger, the romantic idea that great things are usually accomplished by a larger-than-life individual working alone.” Traditionally in nursing, individuals were often placed in leadership positions because they were outstanding performers in a particular area (unit management, research, professional organization). They had been given varying degrees of responsibility in terms of human and organizational resources, and they did exceptionally well. Yet few achieved their excellence by learning to work as part of a team. Instead, setting boundaries around their area of responsibility, motivating those who worked directly with them (and in competition with others), and building silos were most common (and rewarded). Yet these are the very individuals who are now viewed as leaders and earmarked for positions of power and prestige in organizations. Wageman and colleagues make the point that senior leaders in any organization, even when exceptionally good at what they do in their own area, do not necessarily work well with others outside their realm. Nor are they necessarily interested in doing so. Chief executive officers (CEOs) often assume that these talented individuals will have the best interests of the entire organization at heart and have the knowledge and experience to understand what the right path is for the future of the organization. In this book, the authors discuss the “Fall of the Heroic CEO” and have studied these star performers and high performing executive teams. They provide guidance for a CEO who wants to build a high performing team. By developing a compelling purpose, getting the right people on the team, and providing structure, resources, and coaching, the executive team learns to stretch, support, and reward individuals in the organization to engage and grow.

All 3 of these spoke to me about the critical need for a more systematic approach to leadership development in nursing—at the individual and team level. Currently there are several leadership programs in nursing, and all provide the requisite coaching, mentorship, financial support, and time for the individual to build a repertoire of skills. These programs are highly valuable and are beginning to fill the gaps in leadership we are currently experiencing. But they are not enough. Teams of leaders, and followers, must also be engaged, supported, and rewarded on a larger scale in each organization. The larger context of change and threat in our environment has many frozen and worried about moving forward on important initiatives. It is time for bold decisions by nursing leaders who can communicate in ways that will engage both the young leaders and followers in an organization, and who will facilitate “stretch” and growth for all in an organization. Much can be done without significant investments in funding—time is the precious commodity. Time to deliberate about the best path, time to plan a reasonable execution, and time to communicate the rationale for the path taken. But no one will give us time. That gift of time will only come by ignoring some of the incessant demands, some of the noise, and some of the whine. It will take leaders at all levels to support the new directions nursing must take. And McBride reminds us—the formal leaders must know when and what to ask the developing leaders to do. And those developing leaders must be willing to share not just the responsibility for leading, but the power and risk of leading. Bold is a strong word. And bold leaders must engage those in their organizations to do their best work. Agho’s findings remind us that followers who become engaged, stay engaged, speak out and up, and then work with leaders to make the environment a better place for progress are highly likely to shape an effective organization in which all nurses can make a difference. And the next generation of bold, dynamic leaders, who know when to lead and when to follow, will grow into their own.
REFERENCES


Author Descriptions

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