

Stories for SAFETY

Sharing the evidence about nursing and patient safety

NURSING LEADERSHIP AND PATIENT SAFETY — 10 STEADY STEPS

We're constantly hearing about the need for nursing leadership. Oceans of ink and pixels are spent on the topic. Yet for many, leadership is just another business buzzword, one we're no more likely to use than synergistic to describe ourselves or what's needed in our workplace. Leaders are born, not made, we think.

Wrong, say the three women who founded and run the Dorothy M. Wylie Nursing Leadership Institute. The institute runs two week-long sessions a year to build leadership skills in nurses from across the country. And Judith Skelton-Green, Bev Simpson, and Julia Scott believe developing those skills makes a profound difference in the quality of care patients receive.

Why does leadership matter? According to *Staffing for Safety*, an overview of research on how nurse staffing affects the safety of patients published by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, good leadership is an essential ingredient in creating high-quality work environments for nurses – and better working environments mean better care for patients.

Ms. Skelton-Green, Ms. Simpson, and Ms. Scott say strong nursing leadership benefits patients in a number of ways. Leaders who set an example of focusing on patient safety will create a workplace where safety consciousness is the norm. It takes leaders promoting it, and encouraging and rewarding nurses who improve it, to make awareness of patient safety part of the fabric of a unit.

But the real key to understanding the role of leadership – despite the models of generals and prime ministers and teachers we all have ingrained in our consciousness – is that leaders are not just the people on top. Leadership in the workplace must be much more broadly defined. “It’s not an instinct, some of us don’t have it,” says Ms. Skelton-Green. “But it should be an expected part of the job. We have to find the level at which every nurse is comfortable leading, then try to grow that and stretch that.”

Nurses who feel like leaders are more likely to have the courage to stand up in an unsafe situation or to take risks and challenge a status quo they think is unsafe for patients.

Leadership is too important to be left to develop by chance as nurses gain experience. Instead, leadership must be part of their training and the jobs they do from the very beginning. Ms. Skelton-Green, Ms. Simpson, and Ms. Scott prepared these 10 steps for developing nursing leaders to suggest ways *Staffing for Safety's* leadership message can be put into practice.

The institute uses Kouzes's and Posner's five practices of leadership as the basis of its training programs, the keys to leadership that nurses need to acquire. They are:

- modelling the way;
- inspiring a shared vision;
- challenging the process;
- enabling others to act; and
- encouraging the heart.



Canadian Health Services Research **Foundation**
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10 steps to developing nursing leaders

1. Begin leadership training at the undergraduate level. Introduce the concepts in lectures, encourage students to use them in group projects, then emphasize them during field work, with mentorship or coaching.
2. Explore leadership expectations during the job interview process. Employers could pose a scenario that required nurse leadership and ask what the candidate would do. Candidates should ask what the employer would do to develop leadership skills.
3. The message that leadership comes from everywhere should be part of new employees' orientation. Leadership can be encouraged through courses, experiences that let nurses take the lead, and mentoring or coaching.
4. Provide opportunities for front-line nurses to strengthen their leadership skills, such as coaching them on participating effectively in multi-disciplinary rounds – and making sure staff, especially junior staff, can attend.
5. Identify formal and informal opportunities for every nurse to lead: a care team, a research project, or with time for union or professional association activities.
6. Managers, advanced practice nurses, and clinical nurse specialists should support leadership development as part of daily interactions and through the performance management process.
7. Support experimentation and risk-taking and recognize and reward staff members who take risks and display leadership skills, such as making a difficult decision after hours.
8. Identify the “good apples,” such as people who are doing things that promote patient safety, and provide recognition and reward.
9. Remember that part of leadership is modelling behaviour, so as you encourage leadership, be aware of your own strengths and weaknesses and be empathetic to others.
10. Develop a formal mentorship program that uses senior nurses with proven leadership skills to coach newer nurses.