

Career Pathways

By
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People sometimes settle for less than what they really want. Others are willing to reach for their goals even if it means stepping out of their comfort zone. In his book, *Life Strategies*, Phillip McGraw says, "Some people...keep on reaching...until they get what they've wanted. They are unwilling to settle for a 'bird in hand' if it's not the right bird."

Don't settle for less. You can have the career that you want with the right strategy. Step out of your comfort zone by planning a series of challenging but achievable goals. Healthcare challenges can be your best opportunities. It's a three-step process: Get ready, get set and go.

GET READY

Survey the territory

Nurses are undervalued resources. In the past, nursing shortages have been cyclical, but the present situation looks like a chronic shortage. One reason is because too many organizations have used a quick fix approach creating a reservoir of unresolved problems within nursing. Another reason is that the career patterns of young women have changed. Current high demand for nurses increases your power. Use it wisely to select employment opportunities.

You could take a high paying position, for example, but discover that the facility is understaffed, has poor quality and high turnover. You would experience a long-term setback if you burn out or are involved in litigation. You also lose if you stagnate, because everyone needs to keep up with change. Contrast this with taking a lower paying position with a positive culture where professional growth is encouraged.

GET SET

Assess yourself,

Think about what you would like to do if anything were possible. Read employment ads, even from other industries, and compile a list of universal skills: team orientation, ability to manage multiple projects, excellent oral and written communication skills. Assess what skills you have and which ones you need to learn. Prepare yourself for the future. Anticipate what jobs might be needed, what skills will be required and who would hire you.

Consider your values. ? Do you like to work with defined policies or are you comfortable with unstructured situations? Do you want to make a difference to a large number of people or are you content functioning in a smaller arena? Make a list of favorite jobs and identify what was required. Determine why you liked each job. List any ones that you disliked along with the reasons. Read a book like *What Color is Your Parachute* by Richard Bolles to further analyze your aptitudes and preferences.

Decide if relocation is part of your plan. If so, you are safe preparing for a scarce position such as diabetes educator (Usually one position per facility). But if you plan to remain in the same town, you are better off with versatility as with advanced nurse practice.

Set goals

Nursing is versatile. You can combine it with many other disciplines: sales, business, counseling, teaching, management, supervision, coaching, data management, risk management, quality assurance, speaking, writing, finance and others. Each has tradeoffs regarding salary, community service, autonomy, professional growth and other benefits. You can't have it all. Prioritize.

When you set goals, remember there are two types. One type is specific, measurable, and time limited. For example, " I will

achieve my ACLS certification by May, 2001." A second type focuses on the process instead of only the result. For example, "I will learn as much as I can about leadership." Both kinds are worthwhile and can be combined. Suppose you anticipate the need for more healthcare leaders. You try to learn all you can about leadership using experience and reading. You know that the position will require someone who is a good communicator so you also set some specific goals: "I will publish an article within the next six months" or "I will give three presentations to civic groups within the next year." Writing down your goal makes it easier to achieve because you become accountable.

Make a plan

Plans should be both firm and flexible: firm enough to stay on course but flexible enough to take advantage of unexpected opportunities. Brainstorm. Design a critical path. Even flexible time increments help you stay on track.

If you anticipate a career in advanced nurse practice, for example, you might allot three months to evaluate education programs. Suppose you plan informational interviews with several nurse practitioners. One might suggest becoming knowledgeable about alternative medicine while another might recommend a particular education program. You are smart to modify your plan using their advice but can still achieve your objectives.

The 'hour a day' plan is good for busy people. It's fairly easy to find time for a project if it's only one hour at a time. Spend six hours a week (taking a day off) on a goal and you will be amazed by your accomplishments. The secret is to have enough self-discipline.

GO –

Ways to take action

First, take action while you plan—experience shapes your plan and

makes it realistic. Second, segment your plan into small achievable steps to be finished in a day, week or month. Third, give yourself a reward when you finish each step: free time or even a bouquet of flowers. Forth, network--It familiarizes others about your goals and you obtain valuable feedback. Fifth, make good use of your time-- Use the time limitation technique: for example, work on your ACLS certification for two hours and then go on to something else-- It stops procrastination. Finally, expect some ups and downs. You learn from failure as well as success.

We all have opportunities to plan career pathways. For some, being an expert specializing in one discipline is worthwhile. For others, diversity is better. It is perfectly all right to change your mind. However, missing your full potential isn't wise. It is not only a personal loss, but a loss to society as well.

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