

How Nurses can be Partners with Management

**By
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"A house divided against itself cannot stand." It seems like Abraham Lincoln is talking to us. Healthcare's house appears to be falling down right before our eyes. Will we let it fall or will we work together to rebuild it?

Improve trust

Mutual trust is critical to building partnerships. People are more likely to trust when each side displays a consistent code of ethical behavior. Some people want to improve trust but don't want to make the first move. Trusting makes us vulnerable. If we have been burned in the past we are reluctant to have it happen again. We have both made mistakes. Management has allowed unsafe staffing and nurses have had unrealistic expectations. Restoring trust involves cultivating mutual respect. We need to honor what each side brings to the table.

Break the code of silence

Communication between nurses and management is poor. Nurses have an informal code of silence because prior attempts to communicate have resulted in reprisals. We have learned that it is smarter to keep our opinions to ourselves if we want to retain our jobs. As a result, healthcare has lost our valuable input.

One way for management to break the silence is to listen. People differ. Some want to hear only good news and deny both the problems and their own role. That's like having an abnormal x-ray and touching it up to make it look normal. It is difficult to solve a problem unless you understand it.

Listening has many advantages. It identifies problems. Second, it exposes feelings, those invaluable but sometimes-inconvenient

traits that make us truly human. We need to manage our feelings and give them a positive focus instead of having to deny them. Listening also jump-starts the solution process. Solutions pop up during candid conversations. And listening relieves stress. Bottling-up thoughts and feelings only depletes our energy.

A second way to break the silence is to avoid punitive attitudes. People can't be effective partners if one side is afraid. Some organizations that want to improve communication organize senior management forums for the staff. This seems like a good idea, but doesn't always work as intended. Middle managers may feel excluded or concerned about their own vulnerability. Since nurses work with middle managers every day, it is safer to maintain the silence than risk being too outspoken. Conversations sometime reveal offensive behavior by powerful people, and it takes a brave and politically savvy organization to resolve these issues fairly.

Use a long-term approach

Healthcare has overused the "quick fix" resulting in a reservoir of unresolved issues-- frustrated and burned out employees, dissatisfied patients and wasted resources. Managers and nurses have neglected relationships because they have been reacting to crises. Now, relationships are a new crisis.

Consider a universal example of the folly of too many quick fixes. Suppose a two-year-old has a tantrum. Occasionally giving in to the demands probably won't cause any harm. However, always using the quick fix and giving in to the demands will result in a monster at age 16. Healthcare has created its own kind of monster by using the quick fix too often.

According to Steven Covey in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, we should spend most of our time on important issues before they become urgent. Proactive nurse-management partnerships would avert unnecessary crises.

Be Flexible

Healthcare has been very rigid. Our standards were intended to improve safety, but one effect has been to block innovation. Now some standards are unworkable because they are based on staffing levels that are no longer financially feasible. And we have lost the innovative ideas that could have been the solution.

One nurse who expressed an innovative idea was told "We don't want you to even think about such things." Imagine how offensive it feels to work for an organization that even sanctions control over your thoughts. Victor Frankl, in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, states "the last of the human freedoms is the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." Encourage nurses to think freely by maintaining flexibility.

Share power

Nurses are powerless. We observe problems but don't have enough power to correct them. Assertive nurses are often censured. But, we are held accountable if things go wrong, even if it is a systems failure.

Many successful organizations have found that empowering first-line employees improves customer service, decreases waste and enhances the bottom line.

Nurses are first line employees. Healthcare could win big if it empowered them. Patients would be satisfied. Litigation would decrease because small issues would not snowball into larger ones. Nurses are the most under-utilized resource in healthcare. Empowering us is the best way to create added value.

Nurses would function better in expanded roles with improved critical thinking and decision-making skills. We play strategic roles and should take responsibility to help our organizations succeed.

It is easy to empower nurses. Give authority as well as responsibility. Avoid undermining nurses who are good problem-solvers. Support compassionate nurses to prevent burnout. Hire for attitude and train for skills. Praise and reward for effort as well as

success.

In his book, *The Power of Nice*, Ronald Shapiro advises that "the best way for you to get what you want is to help the other side get what they want." Now is the time for us to have a house united. Everyone would benefit if nurses and managers became partners in improving healthcare.

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