TAKE A MINUTE to look at the leaders in your organization. You will probably find leaders who range from the passionate and inspired change agents to those whose passion and soul are stale and who are just treading water and holding to the status quo. You might also see leaders who are formally disengaged from their people and their work. Now take a look at yourself. Where would you rank in this informal survey? Leadership in the words of Jeffries (1996) is “…the process of influence, literally meaning, ‘to flow from.’ It is spiritual and emotional, dramatic and passionate!! Leadership is vision with purpose. It is communication and empowerment and self-mastery” (p. xv). So what happens when a leader who can’t achieve this zone of leadership excellence remains in the organization in a formal leadership role? How does the soul of a leader become so stale that there is no passion and purpose flowing from this person? And how do those leaders who always remain passionate continue to find the fire to ignite their flames? How do you personally remain fresh and vibrant in your role?

Executive Summary

- Executive shelf life can cycle through several stages of leadership effectiveness, from “fresh and neatly packaged” to “burial at sea.”
- While these changes are not inevitable, successful leaders who thrive on the energy of inspired leadership will remain fresh and vibrant in their role.
- Nurse leaders have the opportunity daily to intervene with themselves and other leaders who are “starting to turn,” becoming disengaged, and losing their mission and purpose in life.

The Fresh and Neatly Packaged/Mature and Tasty Leader

Greenleaf (1977) describes the servant leader as influencing others by serving those they lead. The humility of the servant leader is expressed as thinking more about others than yourself, and in forgetting yourself in the service of others. Servant leaders continually refresh themselves by the continual enlightenment and continued passion that comes from losing one’s self in the mission and in serving the people who are united in this mission. The inspired servant leader is excited continually and always is the “fresh and neatly packaged” and “mature and tasty” leader who people want to follow. When leaders position tasks or their own success above the ultimate service to their people, their reputation tarnishes quickly. Frequently, there is no way to remove this tarnish from the leader’s reputation and restore the fresh and neatly packaged stage.

The Shelf Life of Leaders

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Leaders who disengage withdraw into their comfort zone or shell where they were once secure and successful.

Thoughts for the Stale Soul/Disengaged Leader

Disengagement starts when the leader/manager begins to drift away from nurses, patients, and those whom they serve; they lose their mission and purpose in life. Successful leaders sometimes pull the ladder of success up behind them as they reach to new heights. No one can then follow in their footsteps. Consequently the leader must work alone. When this happens, the stage of “starting to turn” begins to wreak havoc with the leader’s effectiveness.

We have an opportunity everyday to intervene with ourselves and our leaders who are “starting to turn,” beginning to disengage and work alone, and giving off the odor of failure. When we start to lose our purpose and ability to live a purpose-driven life, we begin the downward spiral and our shelf life as a leader deteriorates. Successful leaders create leaders, not followers. They thrive on the energy they create which creates the flow that is the spiritual, emotional, dramatic, and passionate element that is inspired leadership (Jeffries, 1996). This keeps us fresh and neatly packaged, vital, and extends our shelf life.

When the balance of our life begins to get lost, we begin to smell that F.O. because we are going stale. Nash and Stevenson (2004) studied successful leaders who had an extended shelf life and enduring success and found four elements: happiness, achievement, significance, and legacy as their operating frameworks. If any of these four elements were not in equal balance, these leaders were not successful. We have a choice of staying in our comfort zone or pushing ourselves to serve others by achieving the balance in our lives that generates the energy and passion of excellence in leadership.

In the words of Lao Tzu: “The Wise Leader is not collecting a string of successes. The leader is helping others to find their own success. There is plenty to go around. Sharing success with others is very successful” (Heider, 1985, p. 161).$