Executive Summary
- Our reality depends on how we focus.
- To be successful as a leader, we must avoid the chronic filtration process of our minds and make connections and possibilities out of parts that appear very much unrelated.
- The emergence of nurse-sensitive indicators of quality begs our attention to rethink how nurse leaders are leading quality efforts.

There is a Zen story told by Mapes (2003) about a very successful corporate executive whose world at work and home had fallen apart. He traveled around the world to find the Master who was known to hold the secrets to happiness. The Master said there were three. The first secret he revealed was “pay attention.” When asked what the second secret was, the Master said “pay attention,” and when asked about the third secret, the Zen Master reiterated “pay attention.” Mapes tells us we create our reality by the conscious and unconscious choices we make about what we will and will not focus. We create our reality out of what we finally believe is real and possible after our filtering system has told us what is true. Our reality depends on how we focus.

The world of quality is changing rapidly. The demand from consumers and payers for transparency with our quality data is gaining momentum. Into this mix we now have the pressure to measure and report on nurse-sensitive indicators. We can use this challenge to focus on this new reality now and quickly develop the “impossible” concept of zero defects with nurse-sensitive indicators. Or we can focus on our old models and delay the breakthrough thinking that is needed for this new era of quality.

As leaders we must lead and manage change. To be successful as a leader, we must avoid the chronic filtration process of our minds and make connections and possibilities out of parts that appear very much unrelated. It takes the ability to “pay attention” in new ways to lead effective change. Unfortunately, leaders miss many cataclysmic events because their model of success that brought them where they are today is not questioned. This model is not the pathway to success in the future. The emergence of nurse-sensitive indicators of quality is one of those events that beg our attention to rethink how we are leading quality efforts.

KARLENE KERFOOT, PhD, RN, CNAA, FAAN, is Senior Vice President for Nursing and Patient Care Services and Chief Nurse Executive, Clarian Health, Indianapolis, IN, and Associate Dean, Nursing Practice Indiana School of Nursing.

Copyright ©2004 Nursing Economic$. 
Possibilities are the most important factor for a leader to consider. As leaders we should be devoting much of our attention now to the possibility of better quality. Possibilities, both positive and negative, create many opportunities for new ways of thinking that will recognize new models and realities, including new dangers. The “Power of Impossible Thinking” (2004) is a concept developed by Wind and Crook of the Wharton School of Business to describe new options for seeing reality differently. One of their suggestions when overwhelmed with complexity of a situation is to practice “zooming out so you can see the forest for the trees;” if you are too far back from a problem, “zoom in to examine the details before coming back to the big picture” (p. 236). According to these authors, many of us suffer from “cognitive lock” because we become so fixed in a single view of the world that we filter out all information that conflicts with our model of reality. We are then unable to see other possibilities. For example, we do this professionally when we filter information through our experience as a nurse, physician, hospital CEO, or patient, and the list goes. We can break these patterns if we learn the skills of impossible thinking that enable us to pay attention in new ways.

In actuality, our reality consists of the interpretations of stimuli and events that we develop between our ears. As our brains try to make sense of stimuli, we create a reality for us that may or may not reflect the reality that other people see. William James, the philosopher, wrote that if you create a picture in your head of what you want to be, and hold it there long enough, you will soon be exactly like you are thinking (Mapes, 2003, p. 149). Negative pictures of us and our future become as real as positive pictures of great success. The same is true of the organizations for which we work. If the picture created by influential people in the organization is one of fear of the future, lack of direction and success, so the organization will become. By contrast, if we as leaders pay attention to success in our organizations and the success of people within the organizations, so it will be. Impossible thinking becomes a real possibility.

We choose what kind of picture we will paint for the future of our organization and for ourselves. This picture is predetermined by where we put our attention and how we react. Leaders must see and understand a broad range of information that constantly competes with our view of reality. Attending and really hearing and understanding the views of others and their reality describe what the Zen Master was trying to explain. Moving from telling (which is a very easy and familiar style for a leader) to questioning in order to learn and attend to different possibilities is one way of leaping into a new style of leadership and developing the innovations necessary for quality.

Many of our quality programs are based on a model of continuous quality improvement. Mapes (2003) develops the concept of the “cycle of continuous learning” as one of three bases to breakthrough “quantum leap thinking.” He writes that the cycle of continuous learning is complete only when the concepts of question, contemplation, idea, test, reflection, and then returning to question form a continuous loop that results in learning. If the cycle is interrupted, then the continuous process of paying attention and learning is lost. We immediately get stuck in the rut of our mental model and can’t pay attention to any other reality or possibility. By contrast, those who are eternally in this cycle of questioning see the world full of opportunities and solutions rather than danger. We have the opportunity to program our brains and the “brains” of our organizations to think beyond our present mental models and vision new directions. Mapes (2003) writes that our mind creates the fences within which we live. But what we fail to realize is that there are holes in those fences that will give us a peek into the mental models beyond the fences in our minds. We can peek through our fences and see new ways of attaining excellence in quality if we change our questions and if we think impossible thoughts about how we can attain greater levels of excellence in our units and organizations. The neuroscience of learning and
adaptive thinking tells us that with enough practice, we can program our brains to think many different ways. We as leaders do pay attention and we do focus. But is it the right focus? We need to reflect on what sustains our attention, and what we are missing by not attending to diverse stimuli that are not within our immediate range of experience and knowledge. For example, Intel, under the leadership of the legendary Andy Grove, had reinvented itself several times which has given them a long life in the traditionally short lives of other similar companies. Grove has created the culture of “constructive confrontation” as a method of questioning and paying attention to concepts not normally discussed in business of this type. This kind of questioning has raised the company and its governance structure to new levels not possible before (Schlender, 2004). Grove also uses the concept of “strategic dissonance” to explain the phenomena of different people seeing the same picture and making different interpretations. He encourages open discussion of divergent points of view (Wind & Crook, 2004). We can use these same impossible thinking techniques to challenge our current quality programs and create the breakthrough thinking we need.

Summary

Health care is just now feeling the effects of many years of neglect of serious attention to quality outcomes. We have many tools available now to change our thinking and to provide techniques to attain excellence in quality, such as Six Sigma and principals from Toyota. However, these techniques will only get us to a minimal level of quality. We need to change our questions, think the impossible, and break out of our old modes of thinking about quality. Zero defects are possible. We only have to take that quantum leap and think in new ways.

We are posed on the edge of a quantum leap into new ways of thinking about quality. We will hear much more about nurse-sensitive indicators in the near future. Nurse leaders should change their questions now to attend to new models that will get us closer to the ultimate “impossible thinking” goal of zero defects in nurse-sensitive indicators of quality.

REFERENCES


Local Certification Examinations
Now Offered at Multi-Exam Sites

Effective October 16, 2004, Nephrology Nursing Certification Commission (NNCC) examinations became a part of the Center for Nursing Education and Testing’s (C-NET) multiple site offerings. This means that instead of arranging for test sites on local examination day, ANNA chapters can utilize pre-existing test sites in which facilities, exam managers, and proctors are already provided by C-NET. There are several advantages to this including:

• Prearranged test sites; no need for ANNA chapters to arrange a test site on local examination day.
• No need for ANNA chapters to submit a host application or examination manager fee for a local examination.
• No need for ANNA chapters to obtain a proctor for a local examination.

ANNA chapters need only to identify the most convenient examination location, communicate the information to chapter members, and encourage them to apply by the stated deadline. NNCC is confident that this new process is the most convenient and cost-effective way for ANNA chapters to make use of NNCC’s services.

For test dates, locations, and examination application deadline dates, visit the NNCC Web site at www.nncc-exam.org or call 888-884-NNCC (6622).

If there is not a prearranged test site in your area, visit the NNCC Web site for a host application and hosting criteria.