IN THIS YEAR OF INTENSE political campaigns, we are struck with the challenge of how the candidates will differentiate themselves from their competitors. Negative assertions from the candidates proliferate along with their concepts of hope and optimism and the promise of a better future for the country. The candidates’ messages are meant to be infectious. They attempt to spread their beliefs to their constituencies much like viruses. We feel optimistic with positive hope for the future or overwhelmed with negative feelings, depending on the talent of the candidates to infect us with their view.

Leaders create that same kind of intense infection in us. Some leaders in health care create a positive, optimistic infection in us that drive us to develop cooperative and productive relationships. We know that a candidate who does not positively interact with potential voters and who refuses to go where the voters are to explain his/her platform will not be elected. Yet we still have health care leaders who lead from their office rather than reaching out to and meeting people to create a bond of respect and fellowship that is characteristic of good leadership. How do we help leaders learn how to create a sense of hope and desire to follow the leader?

Engaging the Workforce

For years, we have known that an engaged workforce is healthier and generates high-quality and financial outcomes. We also know that an engaged, involved leader can model the behaviors of engagement that will help nurses and other health care personnel to effectively work with co-workers and patients. Inspirational leaders who can create an engaged group of followers will be the most successful. This does not mean that the technical aspects of leadership are less important than the relationship side of leadership. Good leaders are adept at both the technical and the relationship side of their work. As we observe the political candidates, we have a wonderful laboratory to discover what works and what does not in engaging followers to buy into the leader’s message.

Relationships and the ability of the candidate and the leader to feel a sense of personal attachment are important keys to success. Swindell (2007) documents 12 characteristics of an engaged leadership style. Five of the most important involve how the leader interacts with the staff. He suggests that the leaders must continually let the staff know how they contribute to the organization, constantly provide praise, celebrate small successes, create a fair work environment, and support a culture of work-life balance. While these points appear fairly simple, the leaders could evaluate their performance and literally document how often they do this in a single day. It would not be unusual to find that you are busy and do not pay attention to these five important parameters of your leadership style on a daily or even weekly basis.

Saltshaker Message

Gottman (2007) notes that the best research on relationships comes from the most intense relationship we can have — marriage. He believes that the essence of this message can be captured in the metaphor of a saltshaker. If you fill the shaker with as many ways you can say “yes” and sprinkle that throughout the day, you will have the essence of a good relationship. He recommends starting sentences with the word “yes” and then go on to say, “Yes, that

Executive Summary

- As we observe the political candidates, we have a wonderful laboratory to discover what works and what does not in engaging followers to buy into the leader’s message.
- Relationships and the ability of the candidate and the leader to feel a sense of personal attachment are important keys to success.
- Leaders who create this sense of magnetism often can tell the compelling stories that connect with people in the organization.
- The successful leader must first make the commitment to practice evidence-based leadership by examining best practices and modeling her/his leadership practice after these models.

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is a good idea,” and “Yes, that is a great point.” It is useful to become aware of how often you spread the message of “yes” in your relationships versus how often you spread the negativism of “no.” Gottman states that good relations aren’t about clear communications. He instead focuses on the importance of intimate attachments in relations. His message is that people have to see each other as human beings. He advises to inquire and listen to people about the human side of their life — their children, their weekend, and other more personal conversations so you truly know people as people and not just in the role they play at work.

This kind of leadership is very different than the leadership that is based in monitoring, maintaining compliance, and keeping a distance from the staff. Leaders who engage in a personable relationship with their staff open the doors to create followers who become infected with the vision and stated outcomes of the leader. Magnet® hospitals are simply a reflection of the kind of leadership that can create the “magnet” that draws and retains people. Leaders who create this sense of magnetism often can tell the compelling stories that connect with people in the organization. Katzenbach (2000) notes that the most critical factor in achieving this level of performance is the ability of the leader to relentlessly balance the performance of the organization with the fulfillment of the worker. If the relationship is not there, peak performance cannot be achieved and sustained. Magnetic leaders who achieve this level of performance are the ones who can engage people in a compelling story that will capture the imagination of people (Katzenbach, 2000). They also create and honor legends that create a sense of pride in the accomplishment of individual people and the organization. These leaders cannot only create relationships with themselves and the people in the organization, but they can also create a relationship with the dreams and the vision the leader has for the organization.

Making Connections/Building Relationships

In reality, leadership is all about connections and relationships. Just as the political candidates are judged not only on their programs for change but just as strongly on their ability to connect personally with the voters, leaders are also judged on the same criteria. The nurse manager who can develop a personal relationship with the staff in which they sincerely believe the manager is interested in them as people first will be successful. The chief nursing officer who can successfully tell the story of the strategic change for the organization will be successful as long as the people believe in the sincerity of the story because they have a personal and not just a business relationship with her/him. Chief executive officers who create that sense of relationship and connectiveness even though they have no way of personally knowing everyone in the organization will be successful. The political candidates must do that across the entire United States. By contrast, the task should be very doable in health care organizations that have smaller depth and breadth.

Summary

The successful leader must first make the commitment to practice evidence-based leadership by examining best practices and modeling her/his leadership practice after these models. We know from a plethora of evidence that the relationship-based leader who is also grounded in good operational abilities and can paint the picture of a compelling future is much more effective than the leader who is only selling facts and chooses to manage from her/his office. The leader who is driving toward success can use the saltshaker test: How often are you spreading “yes” to create that sense of connectedness and openness? Is the leader creating a sense of magnetism that comes from communicating the compelling story of optimism and hope for the future of the company that will draw people into an exciting future for the organization?

We have great opportunities to watch the candidates for political office position themselves for election. Polls are telling the candidates what is working and what is not. Similar evidence about leaders and their characteristics tell us that relationships with people are what successful leadership is all about.S

REFERENCES


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Each month ANNA’s Online Library features a different educational session from the 2008 National Symposium (Philadelphia, PA) for which members can earn FREE continuing nursing education (CNE) credit. September’s featured session is CMS Update: What the Revised Conditions for Coverage Mean to You. This program provides an overview of the newly revised Conditions for Coverage for End Stage Renal Disease Facilities, which were released by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) in April 2008. Glenda Payne and Judith Kari, ESRD Technical Advisors for CMS, outline the major changes in the regulations and discuss implementation challenges for both surveyors and facilities. As the October 14, 2008 deadline for compliance with the new regulations approaches, the content of this session is particularly timely.

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