Executive Coaching: Professional Self-Care for Nursing Leaders

Imagine investing in your professional development and realizing a 53% increase in your organization’s productivity. Maybe you would rather see a 39% increase in the retention rate of your managers. Or perhaps you would simply like to see a 61% jump in your own job satisfaction? According to 100 executives (mostly from Fortune 1000 companies), they achieved these changes through executive coaching (Manchester Inc., 2001). Whether driven by cost savings, the exclusivity of having one’s own personal coach, or even the awareness that classroom training may not always be the most effective modality for adult learners who happen to be captains of industry, the benefits of executive coaching are clear. Coaching, a valuable and efficient way to promote professional and personal development, has found its niche in the business world. Will the same hold true in health care?

You might be thinking it’s a long way from a Fortune 1000 company to the intricately choreographed chaos of an ambulatory care clinic in a health care facility or the steady stream of crises being fielded daily by nursing executives. When you consider nursing executives’ widened span of control coupled with the real-life consequence of life and death decisions, executive coaching should be right at home in the health care industry.

Why Executive Coaching for Nursing Leaders?

Nursing professionals are part of a special breed. For the majority, their chosen work isn’t just a job; it’s more of a vocation — a calling — in the truest sense of the word. And while they work shoulder-to-shoulder with physicians and other allied health care professionals, the realities nursing professionals share with these other health care professionals can be worlds apart. Leaders from corporate America who manage daily operations can begin to understand a portion of the pressure that nursing leaders feel every day. But the majority of leaders in business or health care, for that matter, don’t feel the weight of decisions, practices, policies, and systems that affect the life and death of other human beings as do nursing leaders.

A graduate school professor once said, “The primary function of people who work in health care is to manage anxiety — their own as well as that of patients and their families.” Isabel Menzies, in her seminal research on nurses and development of social defense mechanisms to manage anxiety (Menzies, 1975), explored the evolution of this tacit and often unconscious dynamic among nurses. From their initial classroom training, through their clinicals and into their professional practice, nurses, like other health care professionals, wrestle with managing the anxiety inherent in the life and death nature of health care organizations. Add to this the seemingly never-ending increases in environmental stresses for nurses — staffing shortages, higher acuity, increasing demands for improved service and ever-present cost containment — and the result is a working environment that tests the limits of even the most highly skilled, most well-adjusted individual. Then imagine the responsibility for leadership and oversight of this workforce and one begins to appreciate the magnitude of the task facing nursing executives. The self-sufficiency so ingrained in the nursing culture begs to be tempered through resources such as executive coaching.

Prescription for Failure

If, through their training, nurses absorb the message to be self-sufficient, the message only gets stronger as it is continually reinforced throughout their careers. Because self-sufficiency is rewarded by our society and organizational cultures, recognizing it becomes problematic. In the name of getting the job done, self-care is sacrificed to preserve self-sufficiency. Consider one busy nursing executive who casually mentions episodic heart palpitations that she should “probably get checked out one day.” Or the director of ambulatory care who, after a meeting with her fellow non-nursing executives, comments that she can’t quite figure out how she always ends up leaving with more work than her executive counterparts.

Add to these scenarios the high turnover of newly hired nurses, impending retirements of scores of seasoned nurses, and broadened spans of control. Mix in the aftermath of doing more with less coupled with shrinking reimbursements and, to paraphrase an old chestnut, nursing leadership begins to look like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Nursing leaders can persist in this seeming endgame or they can fight the
inclination towards self-sufficiency and reach out for support as executives in other industries have learned to do.

Coaching Corporate America

Coaching, long associated with sports, has moved from the locker room to the board room. Evolving over the years with a variety of labels, executive coaching has been an integral, albeit transparent part of the corporate landscape. Since the 1990s executive coaching has solidified its image and focus, gaining a greater acceptance in corporate America for a variety of reasons. No longer carrying the onus of remedial or corrective intervention, coaching is now accurately viewed as a tailored approach to professional development that helps influence the bottom line.

Heartily embraced by corporate America for a variety of reasons, coaching provides benefits that other change and growth modalities do not offer. Primarily, the content of coaching sessions is tailored to the specific developmental needs of the executive. Simply put, this means that what the executive needs in terms of professional growth and development, the executive gets. Because coaching aims at specific targets, it increases the likelihood for success in a way that classroom training and education cannot match. A coach helps one not only at particular issue an executive wants to focus on (the what), but also calibrates the session to the “how” it will play, given that particular executive’s skills, competencies, and experience.

When we think of a waltz, we tend to think of stringed instruments with lush and resonant “voices” and not the low, vibrating tones of a tuba. Similarly, the 1812 Overture conjures up the sound of a full-bodied, booming orchestra and not the high-pitched, wispy sound of a piccolo. In both cases the instrument has an impact on the overall musical score. The same is true in leadership. Who an executive is and how she/he leads are linked. When different leaders “play” the musical score of leadership, the results vary. So while there are leadership best practices (akin to the musical scores), effective leadership is influenced by the instrument and how the music is played. For instance, some leaders may be bold, gregarious risk takers. Others may be quiet “servant leaders” (Greenleaf, 1973). Both can be effective, create unique organizational cultures, and inspire others to achieve great things. But to expect a reserved leader to effectively glad-hand at a reception or ask a self-assured executive to be laid back and just blend in at the team meeting is unrealistic. Coaching helps executives discover what works best for them, thus maximizing their positive impact as a leader. In that respect, executive coaching is the equivalent of caring for and tuning one’s leadership “instrument.” When a leader recognizes the profound impact her leadership has on others, then caring for one’s leadership instrument — oneself — becomes an imperative for leaders who wish to create a long-lasting, positive leadership legacy.

What Coaching Is — and Isn’t

Executive coaching is, in essence, an organizational intervention focused at the individual level. When an executive employs a coach, the coaching addresses specific issues or concerns. These may range from assessing the benefits and liabilities of a particular course of action to improving leadership effectiveness to identifying in-house bench strength as part of succession planning. The common thread in all these situations is a felt need arising from an organizational issue or concern. This is the defining characteristic of coaching and distinguishes it from a therapeutic relationship.

Distinguishing the differences between executive coaching and therapy is important for an executive considering working with a coach. Some coaches come from the ranks of occupational and organizational psychiatry or industrial psychology where the education and training may be more from a therapeutic model. Other coaches come from different disciplines such as organizational behavior, management, business, or communications and combine the expertise of their given field of study with a solid knowledge of psychological dynamics. No matter the coach’s professional training and background, one thing is clear: the primary focus of coaching is always linked to a business issue. Whether aimed at leadership development, strategic planning, business analysis, or effective negotiations, executive coaching addresses business issues that affect individuals in their organizational roles. Executive coaching is not a substitute for personal counseling. Knowing this distinction could make the difference between an action that is career enhancing or career ending.

Professional Self-Care for Nursing Leaders

The leadership challenges in today’s health care organizations are enormous and tax the personal and professional resources of its leaders daily. Today more than ever, nursing leaders must proactively attend to their own professional development if they are to provide a kind of leadership that will inspire others to follow and succeed. Often the response to the pressures of leadership is to stop the action, take a break, and pamper oneself. And while a spa day or manicure or sending flowers to yourself may allow you to feel refreshed, re-entry is jolting and quickly obliterates the sense of well-being that had all too briefly been recaptured. Thus, nursing leaders may find themselves returning to any number of recurring scenarios. Some engage in unsuccessful battles to convince fellow non-nursing executives that onsite day care isn’t a luxury but a necessity to ease the burden on already stressed nurses. Others face the challenge of enlightening a medical director who fails to see the systems issues affecting care delivery in the ambulatory care department and always concludes that it’s a nursing problem.

However, imagine an alternative course of action aimed at the root causes of the stress and pressure.
Envision a kind of professional self-care that helps you be better prepared to effectively handle issues on a daily basis. Learn how to strategize more effectively or perfect your negotiating skills. Be more persuasive and sell an idea or analyze alternative staffing plans. As a nursing leader, give yourself the option of on-demand professional support. Take some time to reflect on the leadership demands faced in your current role. Where do you feel most in command of situations? When do you notice butterflies in your stomach? What sort of situations or issues do you dread? As you laundry list your answers, you are beginning to develop an agenda for your first coaching session.

Coaching sessions provide you with on-demand or as-needed support that conforms to your schedule. In addition, coaching frees you from having to sift through a lot of information and material that comes with conventional workshops, seminars, or training programs. In exchange, you will need to be prepared to work with direct feedback about your leadership and be willing to ante up and change your behavior. Coaching may be one of the few professional development options in which your willingness and ability to “walk the talk” is immediately apparent.

As one executive coach put it, “Professionals have coaches. Amateurs do not” (Agnio, 2001). Deciding to engage an executive coach is a commitment of your dollars, your time, and your word that you want to and will change. While this might feel daunting, consider that coaching can provide you with both the support and challenge so that you in turn can give your direct reports the kind of leadership they need to be successful.

### Coaching: Behind Closed Doors

During an initial executive coaching session, you would probably see the client and consultant meeting in the client’s office. The consultant might provide an overview of the consulting process or discuss ground rules for the coaching relationship. Of foremost importance in any coaching relationship is confidentiality. Other ground rules might include: frequency and duration of sessions, scheduling and canceling sessions, as well as expectations regarding the completion of any post-session assignments or exercises.

The coach would also ask a series of open-ended questions to assist in identifying the client’s priorities. Coaching sessions usually focus on the client’s leadership or relational skills. And while the client’s personal style influences both these areas, coaching is not one-on-one counseling or therapy. Personal issues often arise during coaching sessions, but should be relevant to the leadership issue at hand.

The coaching session is shaped by the client’s agenda and guided by the coach’s expertise, observations, and feedback. The coach might have the client complete a leadership assessment that might incorporate 360 degree feedback or shadowing. There is much to be gained when the coach acts as the client’s shad-

Feedback is an essential component of effective coaching. So often leaders get caught up in doing their jobs that they lose sight of whether or not what they are doing is effective. Since it is difficult to be circumstantial in a turbulent environment, so it is understandable that leaders don’t stop and take stock of their actions. Even those leaders who make the time to solicit feedback often get caught in the predicament of having to decode the feedback they receive. They know that both their status and role as a leader often causes direct report feedback to be either cautious or soft pedaled. Successful coaching avoids this Catch-22 by offering objective 360 degree feedback as a starting point for discussion and determining a developmental focus. The anonymous and confidential feedback from bosses, peers, and direct reports gathered through valid and reliable feedback instruments is the hallmark of a solid 360 degree feedback process.

Subsequent coaching sessions might be face-to-face, via phone, or even through e-mail. You would expect to see ongoing dialogue between the coach and the client, addressing the issues and concerns identified by the client. At times the content may focus on real-life work situations that the client determines are critical for success. In other instances, the coaching session may address a longer-term developmental need such as negotiating skills or strategic thinking. Yet other sessions might address emergent issues requiring objective analysis before action is taken. Coaching contracts usually span a 6-month to 1-year period, although different arrangements can be developed to meet specific client needs.

Regardless of the content, coaching clients place a high value on the fact that coaching can focus on behavior change in the privacy of their office where missteps won’t raise eyebrows and rehearsing new behaviors can be done in a psychologically safe and supportive environment. You might see a client rehearsing the opening of a particularly sensitive discussion. Or witness a client mapping out a strategy to create buy-in for a controversial plan. In another situation you might observe a role play between the client and the coach with the coach giving feedback on the client’s tone, body language, or even choice of words. The coach might model different behaviors and ask the client for a return demonstration. You might hear laughter and groans. You might see smiles of satisfaction or furrowed brows communicating resistance or disagreement. Above all, you would see incremental professional growth and development grounded in real-life organizational issues and everyday leadership challenges.
The Right Coach for You

Selecting a coach with whom you can work effectively is critical if you want results. Coaches come from diverse fields of study and disciplines — organizational development, industrial psychology, psychology, management consulting, and business. Coaches also bring different levels of education, experience, and qualifications to the table. Some coaches will have doctorates, others might be masters prepared. Still others may have a bachelor’s degree, certification in coaching, or no college degree but years of front-line management and leadership experience. There are many Web sites that promote coaching services as part of a range of consulting services offered through their companies. Because there is no single standard by which to select a coach, the following ideas may help you navigate the selection process.

Use referrals. Network with trusted colleagues (both in and outside of nursing) and inquire about their experience with coaches. Ask specific questions about their working relationships with their coaches — what they liked and didn’t like, what worked and didn’t work. A positive referral from a colleague with whom you share values, work styles, etc. will probably be a good match for you as well. Be alert, however, to referrals from colleagues whose leadership styles or values are very different from yours. If after a phone conversation or face-to-face meeting with a prospective coach you determine that it’s not a good fit, don’t lose heart. Use their referral as a springboard to other coaching contacts.

Cruise the information highway. Use search engines to visit Web sites of companies that offer coaching services. Familiarize yourself with the various types of coaching available. Check out the qualifications of the coaches on-line, if available. Typically, the more years spent coaching, the higher the likelihood that the expertise you require will be there. E-mail prospective coaches to obtain names and telephone numbers of client references. You can also use Web sites to get an idea of how fees and coaching arrangements vary. But be aware that you may be comparing apples and oranges. Typically larger firms offer set coaching “packages” (X number of sessions for Y dollars over a specified time). Smaller firms or sole practitioners may offer you more choices and flexibility.

Screen prospective coaches. Before you commit to a working relationship, pre-screen prospective coaches through telephone or face-to-face interviews. As with any good interviewing technique, ask the same questions of all prospects and be sure to include open-ended questions since they will provide you with the richest information. Seek coaches who bring to the table a good working knowledge of your business or the ability to quickly come up to speed. Also, look for coaches who are well-versed in appreciating organizational politics. Finally, investigate coaches who are grounded in a sound understanding of psychological dynamics. The combination of these three elements — business knowledge, organizational politics, and psychological dynamics are baseline competencies for an effective coach (Levinson, 1996).

Assess the assessments. Many coaches will use assessments as part of the initial coaching process to identify baseline data. If the coach you are considering uses assessment tools, ask about the reliability and validity of the instruments. Be aware that some instruments look slick but lack solid psychometrics and research to back them. Also, be aware that only licensed psychologists can administer and interpret most psychological tests, including personality tests and intelligence tests.

Broaden your search. Don’t assume that out-of-town talent means out-of-sight fees. While coaches and consultants often charge for their travel expenses and/or travel time, you may still be able to work with the coach of your choice if you look at creative alternatives. If you find an out-of-town coach you like, consider the option of team coaching and maximize the coach’s on-site time, gaining more value for the travel dollars you expend. If your budget is stretched and team coaching isn’t in the plan, consider creating a coaching consortium. Network with fellow nursing executives and propose a regional coaching consortium — a collection of professionals from other organizations who will work with one particular coach. In this way the travel costs can be divided among the consortium members. Remember that once you have built initial rapport, effective coaching can take place via phone or e-mail.

Listen to your inner voice. All things being relatively equal among your final choices for coach — credentials, experience, expertise — you’ll know you’ve found your coach if you can answer “yes” to these questions:

- Do I feel comfortable enough to let my hair down with this person?
- Do I feel certain that this coach will maintain confidentiality?
- Does this coach possess the necessary expertise to provide appropriate support to me through the change process?
- Does this coach understand organizational politics well enough to effectively counsel me?
- Does this coach possess the skills to push back and challenge me in ways that I can hear and accept the feedback?

Coaching for Others

Determining likely candidates for executive coaching within the nursing profession is not without its questions. Do coaching candidates need to have titles such as vice-president, director, or executive manager after their names? In today’s ambulatory care environment, a nurse manager is involved in levels of decision making that would rival those of an executive in a Fortune 1000 company. The same could be said of bedside nurses on a busy medical-surgical unit. So in addition to those with an executive title after their names, who else in the nursing population might be considered...
likely candidates for executive coaching?

If you are a nursing executive, you might want to consider how to retain your best managers. Research shows that those who receive coaching consider it a perk. Savvy nursing leaders know that building managerial and leadership bench strength is a matter of survival. They consider executive coaching a way to provide one-on-one attention to members of their leadership teams. Consider executive coaching as a retention tool. Coaching’s three-fold benefits aid in retaining leadership talent, building leadership know-how, and developing future leaders.

Team coaching is a variation on this theme. Team coaching focuses on two goals: improving executive team effectiveness and enhancing both the leadership and “followership” of the members. Unlike conventional team building or team development, team coaching is event or situation driven and grounded in real-life, real-time issues facing executive teams. Because there is a clearly defined goal in team coaching, you realize three benefits. First, the organizational issue requiring attention is addressed head on. Second, the team learns to work more effectively by working on an actual issue instead of a simulated exercise. Third, individual team members receive direct feedback and gain insight into how they help or hinder the team’s operation.

The other advantage of using a coach for your professional development is intergenerational coaching. In essence, as you experience the coaching relationship you receive the direct benefit of one-on-one issue-focused coaching as well as the indirect benefit of learning how and when to coach your own staff. Over time, as you begin to coach your own staff, your staff will be learning to effectively coach those individuals who report to them. This is not to say that once you work with a coach you are prepared to become a professional coach yourself, but the experience of coaching does raise awareness about how and when you can and should intervene as a leader.

Create Your Leadership Legacy

Most often leaders assume their roles and quickly immerse themselves in the job with little thought to the impact that their leadership will have on others. In the push of daily work, purposefully carving out time to create a leadership legacy often falls to the bottom of the list. The truth is, however, that high impact, positive leadership rarely, if ever, happens by default. In these times of incredible change within health care, those who serve others deserve the best leadership.

One way to be the best leader is to clarify your leadership legacy. The notion of a leadership legacy came to me many years ago when I was leading a workshop for managers at a local health care organization. We were discussing effective and ineffective leadership as a way to help managers recognize their impact on their work groups. One participant recalled a scenario that she shared with the group. She commented, “Years ago I worked for a nurse manager who had a significant impact on me. She was the kind of leader that could bring the best out of people. You could be at the end of your shift with your coat on ready to head out the door and if she stopped and asked you to please lend a hand for a few minutes because of one reason or another, even if you were dog tired, you would gladly hang up your coat and pitch right in.”

When I asked the participant what it was about that particular nurse manager that evoked such dedication, she replied, “She was a professional. She was always looking for ways to improve what she was doing. She took her job seriously. We saw her asking for help when she needed it and she wasn’t embarrassed to say if she didn’t know something because she could always find someone who could teach her. It made me feel that if my boss didn’t know everything, then it was OK if I didn’t know everything too. But one thing was for sure. If you told her you didn’t know something, you knew that she’d say ‘Okay for today, but I expect you to get a handle on it by tomorrow.’ And you knew that she would help you get the help you needed to succeed.”

Clearly the leadership legacy of that nurse manager promoted professional growth and inquiry. Your leadership legacy is uniquely your own. Your leadership legacy begins with your vision of the ideal. To uncover that ideal is simple. Take a few moments to time travel into the future and imagine that you are at your retirement party. Imagine that your staff is bringing in a huge cake. Your staff had the cake decorated and there is a special inscription on it. This inscription captures the essence of the impact your leadership has had on your staff. They thought long and hard to come up with just the right wording. You come closer to the cake and you read the words. What do they say?

That’s the beginning of the vision of your leadership legacy. Translating that vision into action is the next step — a step made easier with the support of your own executive coach. $

REFERENCES

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