

Nursing—Built on a cornerstone of leadership



Adam Tebben

New graduate success requires initiative and support.

Editor's note: In this month's issue, ANA President Pamela Cipriano and National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) President Adam Tebben exchange editorial space. Cipriano's editorial can be found in the April/May issue of Imprint, the membership magazine for the NSNA.

PROBABLY ALL NURSES can remember how they felt on their first day of clinicals: wide-eyed, apprehensive, afraid of making a mistake, and perhaps with a looming sense of intimidation. After a while, you gain confidence and an increasing appreciation for the complexities of nursing as you learn new skills and practice them daily.

Yet with each new experience we relive those same initial trepidations. We face increasingly higher expectations from our instructors, and those same expectations eventually become all too real when we graduate and become RNs.

New graduates are faced with the fact that no matter how long they were in nursing school, they'll never know everything they need to know on their first day as a staff nurse. The new graduate has to adapt to the work culture; solve complex problems; think critically; and most important, show humility and ask questions so that errors are not made and learning and mentoring can take place.

But not all new nurses successfully adjust to their new, more demanding environments. The failure to do so inevitably ripples outward and contributes to the nursing shortage—burnout leads to a turnover rate of 30% for nurses in their first year, and 57% after 2 years. Why? Perhaps many students aren't able to holistically handle different forms of adversity.

Leadership development could be a significant contributor to preventing burnout in new nurses by exposing new graduates to and teaching them to handle complex situations that are unavoidable within a leadership role.

Jump in

I've always thought that there's no better way to attack a "first" than to jump in all the way—head first—and gain

experience by submersion. While in nursing school, I practiced my own submersion therapy by volunteering for leadership positions on the state and national levels. This sharpened my conflict-resolution skills; to get to a common goal, I had to effectively work with others who had different points of view. If the various boards of directors were the grinding stone, and our goals the sword, then I was the swordsmith who had to work with all of the elements for a successful outcome. If there was a problem that needed an answer or an action that needed to be taken, either an individual or a collective effort helped to sharpen the sword to get the job done.

Have our backs

Although personal leadership attributes are to some extent innate, leadership skills can be learned. As nursing students, the opportunities to nurture nascent leadership skills may first come with faculty support and from incorporation of leadership development in every aspect of the nursing curriculum. Educators, preceptors, managers, and mentors must then pay it forward by encouraging students and new colleagues to be leaders. They need to reassure their protégés that stepping out of their comfort zone is okay—and even necessary. Students need to know that if they take on tough issues, faculty will mentor and support them, guide them in building their conflict-resolution skills, and reassure them that "not knowing everything" is normal. In fact, if you think you're done learning, you're missing out on opportunities to grow and develop emotional intelligence that will make you a better person, and ultimately, a better nurse.

This kind of approach—within a profession that's built on a cornerstone of leadership—will flourish with time, perseverance, and cultivation. It won't thrive without initiative. It's our duty to reach out to those who follow us with the means and path to succeed. By thinking forward, we set a higher bar for nursing, create a brighter future, and better ensure the success of the next generation of professional nurses. *



Adam Tebben is president of the National Student Nurses' Association and a nursing student at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas.

Selected reference

Spence Laschinger HK, Finegan J, Wilk P. New graduate burnout: The impact of professional practice environment, workplace civility, and empowerment. *Nurs Econ.* 2009;27(6):377-83.