The 3- to 5-Year Target: Its Meaning for Nursing

Before you read this editorial, think about the organization you know best. How long do most new nurses stay? If you work in an academic institution, that number may differ from what you might find in a related service organization and might relate to a tenure time line. If you are in a long-term care facility, in some states, that time might be counted in months rather than years. If you are in a small community, that time might be counted in decades. But what about those organizations where a large part of our care is still delivered? Yes, the acute care hospitals in big cities. Those have been the sites receiving the greatest attention in terms of retention and turnover research. Numerous aspects of what influences a person to stay have been explored. Yet, is there a phenomenon to be studied that could help us support nurses at a critical period in their career development? I am posing the question; I don’t have the answer. Here, then, is the situation.

In 2008, noted author Malcolm Gladwell told several stories to make his point about there being a 10,000-hour rule. The most familiar to us probably would be the one about Bill Gates, who started programming as an eighth grader! By the time he dropped out of Harvard to start a software company, he had logged far more than 10,000 hours of programming. Some of it occurred at his high school, and some of it occurred through evening and weekend work. The point, though, was that he took advantage of opportunities that allowed him to develop skills distinguishing him from his peers. He was, as Gladwell’s title suggests, an outlier.

Now let’s switch to the work by Liesveld and Miller (2005). They took the work of the StrengthsFinder™ and examined it in the teaching profession. Basically, they found that those who capitalized on their strengths often did not do the “norm” in teaching and as a result made a difference for those whom they taught. They also reported that teachers burn out in their typical roles in about 5 years. (Using 2,080 hours per year as the rough equivalent of full-time work, 5 years translates to about 10,000 hours of work.) Specifically, they say that “the positive effects of experience on job performance wear off pretty quickly. In fact, in most professions, they wear off in 5 years” (Liesveld & Miller, 2005, p. 21).

And finally, Benner, Tanner, and Chesla (2009) suggested that the nurse who is in an organization for 2 to 3 years is at a critical juncture. This timing occurs during the competent phase. They stated, “Furthermore, this stage of skill acquisition calls for new strategies for performance that are not so analytical and elemental. These new experiential demands create a difficult stage of transition. Unless the nurse can come to grips with these issues in ways that create new possibilities without too much personal distress and confusion, she will feel compelled to leave critical care nursing and perhaps leave nursing altogether” (Benner et al., 2009, p. 100).

It seems as if nurses reach a critical point somewhere between 3 and 5 years of their employment. If support to continue to progress and to resolve issues is present, nurses are likely to remain and to continue their career trajectory. If that support is not present, they may become what many of us have called “refrigerator nurses” (i.e., just working to pay off the refrigerator, the car, etc.) or they may move on to another place or, worse, out of nursing. Our task is to examine what our organizational data suggest. Do we seem to fit this idea of the critical timing? If so, what are we doing to prevent an exodus or a demise? If not, what are we doing that keeps people with us? If it is just geography, that is not good enough. Our task as educators is to support the lively learning that feeds our curiosity, makes us want to learn and do more, and helps us do our best for patients.

REFERENCES


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