Amid the winds of health care reform (health insurance reform, really), the shifting sands of the economy, and the changing face of higher education, nursing education remains relatively insular, isolated, and, in many respects, protected from the turbulence that our clinical partners and liberal arts colleagues are experiencing. Nursing programs continue to grow in both number and size, whereas majors in other disciplines are being consolidated or eliminated. State-of-the-art clinical laboratories are being outfitted with high-fidelity simulation and other technology, whereas basic science departments in research-light institutions live with outdated equipment and the burden of deferred maintenance. Nursing faculty positions are being preserved and in some instances added, whereas other sectors of the academy face a declining proportion of full-time faculty, supplanted with adjunct and temporary faculty who can be hired and let go as circumstances change. And in a few instances, significant salary adjustments have been made to attract and retain the nurse educator workforce needed to respond to enrollment demands, whereas salaries of colleagues in other departments remain flat, sometimes creating interdepartmental resentment. When confronted by daily demands or immersed in day-to-day activity, it’s hard to see the forest for the trees or to realize that the proverbial glass is, by and large, more full than empty.

This is not to say that nurse educators aren’t experiencing the stresses and strains of growing demands on their time and energy brought about by rising enrollments, advances in science and technology, increasing expectations for research and scholarly productivity (including external funding to support it), and, for a growing number, the need to remain active in clinical practice. Complaints of expanding and excessive teaching and service workloads abound—a frequent mantra being not having time for research and scholarly work. In an environment—and an economy—that demands us to do more with less, the last thing we want to hear is that we need to adopt a greater sense of urgency. Yet Kotter (2008) suggested that is exactly what is needed—namely, a sense of positive, constructive, “true urgency” (¶ 5). However, he noted—and lamented—that more often than not, the more frequent responses to the changes swirling around us are ones of blame, or frenetic, and largely unproductive, activity.

Kotter noted that all too often, finger-pointing “over there” is a common response to the frustrations and fears in the workplace, “over there” being the administration, the admissions office, the information technology department, or fill-in-the-blank. He stated that although people often recognize a problem and have some ideas how to solve it, they typically fail to take ownership for doing something about it, believing the problem to be someone else’s responsibility. As a result, complacency replaces constructive action, and in some cases, a sense of “what can I do?” helplessness sets in. In other instances, the opposite response occurs: an increase in the pace and volume of activity and effort (i.e., working faster, harder, and longer, but not necessarily smarter or more productively). Kotter referred to such frenetic activity as “anxiety- or anger-driven false urgency” (¶ 4). Either response saps the energy and spirit of both the individual and the organization and leads to fatigue, burnout, and an increasing spiral of ineffectiveness and inefficiency.

In place of this false urgency, what Kotter said is needed is a sense of “true urgency”—“a gut-level feeling” (¶ 5) that we have opportunities every day to make constructive progress and a determination that we will personally embrace those opportunities, not simply to survive, but to thrive in ways that are productive for our work and our organization. He wrote:

True urgency leads to an almost hyper-alert behavior, a constant search for what you can do—even if it’s only making a useful comment that steers one meeting today in a more productive direction… With real urgency, people cut out low priority work and delegate more. They cooperate more with others who are taking smart action. They look for the opportunities hidden in the hazards. (¶ 6)

So, taking Kotter’s advice, let’s begin—every day—to ask ourselves:
How can I keep the next meeting I attend on track and moving in a more productive and less time-consuming direction?

- What can I eliminate from my daily to-do list, to allow me to focus my time and energy on my highest priority and most meaningful work?
- Is there another person or office who can assume responsibility for some of the work I’m currently spending time on? In other words, am I the best person to do this particular work?
- Who in my work circle is “taking smart action” and is someone I might cooperate or collaborate with to learn, improve, and expand or enhance my contributions?
- How can I reduce or eliminate the frenetic activity in my daily work and avoid the temptation to place blame for my frustrations elsewhere?
- Do I take full ownership for my work and the work of my team, my department or school, and my institution?
- Do I continually look for the every day opportunities “hidden in the hazards”?

To remain relevant, we must respond with true urgency!

Reference

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