Educating Our Students for Everyday Leadership

If you ask who are the leaders in nursing education, most will name those who hold an appointed or elected leadership position, such as a department chair or dean, or an officer in student government or a professional association. Instead, I focus here on the opportunity for nurse educators to instill in every student not only the knowledge and skills to be a competent practitioner, but also the qualities and commitment to be an “everyday leader.”

What does it mean to be an everyday leader? Below, I share some excerpts of an address I gave to the graduating students at last year’s Commencement in my home institution. I hope readers will find them helpful in thinking about how to inspire students to incorporate in their professional identity the idea that they have both an opportunity and a responsibility to become everyday leaders. We should heed the lessons here for ourselves as well, given that our students often look to us for models of professionalism and everyday leadership.

“Being an everyday leader is first and foremost about character, integrity, and authenticity. This begins with knowing yourself. You must be crystal clear about what you believe in, and what values and ethical principles you hold that you can trust to ground and guide you when facing challenges, uncertainty, setbacks, or even failures.

“Knowing yourself also means knowing what you are passionate about, what drives and motivates you, what you stand for. It means knowing what and how you wish to contribute, and what you aspire to be and do in your lifetime, for yourself, for others, and for the greater good.

“Take a moment to ask yourself what distinguishes you as an everyday leader. What adjectives come to mind when you think of yourself—Can you quickly name three? What do they tell you about yourself? What do they tell others about you? Would others be likely to use those same or similar adjectives to describe you? Ask them!

“Besides knowing yourself, you must be constantly tuned in to the people around you, those who know you well and, more importantly, those who don’t. What do they see and feel about you? How do they experience your interactions with them? Is your social radar sufficiently tuned to detect how your emotions, words, tone, temperament, mood, and body language affect not only yourself, but others—those you live with, work with, socialize with, or provide care for?

“Knowing yourself also means knowing your strengths, those particular talents and capabilities that distinguish you. It means leveraging them to achieve your goals and generously sharing them with others to help them achieve theirs.

“Equally important is acknowledging your limitations—for we all have them. Everyday leaders are both confident in their strengths and humble about their limitations. They know when to ask for help and have the courage to do so. Everyday leaders are willing to acknowledge and be accountable for their mistakes and commit to learn from them. They are quick to apologize when apology is called for, and they forgive graciously when slighted or harmed.

“Everyday leaders have the courage to ask for feedback from trusted friends and colleagues and to hear and accept that feedback even when it feels unwelcome or unsettling. Listen and learn when someone gives you the gift of feedback—for it is indeed a gift. Will you accept it and learn from it, or will you try to think of reasons it can’t be true, perhaps even question the motives of the person who gave it to you? I hope when such a gift is presented to you that you allow yourself to be open to receiving and accepting the wisdom wrapped inside. Tuck it into your store of personal lessons learned to carry forward.

“One of the most important ways you will show yourself to be an everyday leader is to embrace differences in the people you encounter in life—people whose appearance, life experiences, beliefs, values, status, social class, culture, and viewpoints are different from yours. See these as opportunities to learn about and from them, and seek to understand them. In doing so, you will not only broaden your perspectives, you will become a person richer in spirit. In all ways and in all situations, everyday leaders show respect and generosity of spirit toward others and remain open to learning from them. Sadly, this willingness to know and understand others who are different from us seems in all too short order these days.

“You must continue to seize and even create further opportunities to continually learn and grow, and know that learning is going to be a lifelong endeavor. Being an everyday learner is also part of being an everyday leader. The pace of knowledge development is faster than it’s ever been in human history. What does this mean for you? It means that while you’ve acquired
the foundational knowledge needed to be competent practitioners for your respective roles, much of what you’ve learned may sooner or later become obsolete or irrelevant. It means you must learn continuously throughout your career, becoming adept at new learning, at being able to differentiate among all the bits and pieces of data and information what is relevant and valid from that which is not, and what is meaningful and worth adding to your knowledge base and what is not, in order to continue to practice your profession at your very best.

“Expect to experience unprecedented change and uncertainty in your career. Our health care system is evolving rapidly, and the road ahead will not always be clear or smooth. Being an everyday leader means having the courage to take risks, and the agility to navigate complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. At times, you will have to design your way forward, using your best critical thinking and clinical judgment skills to make evidence-based practice decisions in the best interests of your patients.

“Everyday leadership also means the ability to persevere in the face of challenges and obstacles, to see them as possibilities instead of barriers, and have the stamina to persist in solving them. However, to accomplish and contribute what’s worthwhile in life requires more than knowledge, talent, and skill. There are plenty of people in the world with all the knowledge, talent, and skill to be successful, yet success eludes them. To reach your goals—to be an everyday leader applying all your knowledge, talent, and skills to the best of your ability—also requires passion and perseverance.

“Angela Duckworth (2016), a psychologist who studies the qualities necessary for success in life and in work, believes the secret is developing and applying a blend of passion and persistence that she calls grit. She defines grit as combination of passion and perseverance that matters as much as intelligence and talent. Each of you has shown diligence, perseverance, hard work, and commitment in pursuing your goals. Along your journey, you no doubt overcame some obstacles, setbacks, and perhaps even failures. You are going to have to continue nurturing this quality of grit in yourself to enable you to stick with it even when the going gets tough, or when you falter, even when your progress is agonizingly slow (Duckworth, 2016).

“At such times, it will be important to remind yourself of your values, your passions, and your goals, and to seek support and comfort from colleagues, family, and friends, to help you endure and persist. Another crucial resource is to reach out for advice and wisdom from a trusted mentor. Having inspirational and trusted mentors will be one of the most valuable things you can do for yourself. When a colleague or supervisor sees something in you and offers you an opportunity to take on or participate in a new challenge or experience, embrace it and go for it, even if it feels scary or daunting. Trust what they’ve seen in you, and step up to the plate to try something new. Be receptive to their advice and wisdom, be open to the mentoring they are offering you. It could be an opportunity to take on a special project, serve on a committee, lead a meeting, present at a conference, or attend a leadership event. Although these may not seem earth-moving, every new experience can open a door to unexpected and valuable opportunities to further develop your everyday leadership and, perhaps most importantly, your professional network.

“But you don’t have to wait for others to seek you out and offer to mentor you. Instead, follow the mantra of Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy’s (Thomas, 2016). Rather than wait for others to take him under their wing, he sought out people he admired and respected, screwed up his courage, and invited himself to crawl under their wing. Adopt the Dave Thomas model of mentorship and find one or more people you’d like to learn from or emulate, and crawl under their wing. And don’t forget that being an everyday leader means returning the favor. As you become a more seasoned professional, find younger colleagues and others who are interested in learning from you, and offer them your wing to crawl under.

“Speaking of wings, while I’ve been focusing on the personal qualities, behaviors, and values of everyday leadership, I don’t want to lose sight of the importance of applying them in the context of teams. Being an everyday leader is not a solo game. Rather everyday leadership almost always happens in the context of teams and team work. Remember, there is no ‘I’ in ‘T-E-A-M.’

“From geese, we can learn powerful lessons about how to be an everyday leader as a member of the health care team. Every fall, geese fly thousands of miles on their journey from Canada to the southern United States. I’m sure you’ve noticed they always fly in a V-shaped pattern. Consider what lessons we can learn from them about everyday leadership and teamwork.

“Lesson 1: When geese fly together, their wings create lift, reducing air friction for those behind them. Flying in formation increases the flock’s range by 70% and enables the geese to reach their shared destination more quickly and with less energy. When health professionals work together, they create lift for each other and for the team as a whole, and in so doing, they increase their effectiveness and efficiency beyond what they can accomplish individually.

“Lesson 2: Occasionally, a goose leaves the formation to strike out on its own, but soon learns it takes far more effort and energy to reach its destination alone than when it flies with the flock. Practicing solo not only can exhaust the individual practitioner, but it fail to serve the needs of patients, families, and communities, depriving those we serve of the diverse array of knowledge and skills that a team brings to each patient or person encounter.

“Lesson 3: Geese frequently change places in the formation. When the lead goose tires and drops back, it makes space for a new leader, giving itself time to rest while keeping the flock together. Changing places in the formation allows another goose to move into the lead. Rotating team leadership not only allows the health care team to benefit from the diverse expertise and perspectives of each team member, doing so acts in the best interests of the patient. Rotating leadership also allows the team to ensure that the team member best suited to lead the team for a given patient at a given point in time is given the opportunity to do so.

“Lesson 4: Geese constantly honk at each other. They do so to acknowledge each other and encourage the flock to maintain momentum toward their common destination. Continuous sharing of
information and ideas within the health care team and with the patient, family, or community being served is essential for providing safe, high-quality care, avoiding costly mistakes, and achieving the best outcomes. ‘Honking’ at each other also allows the team to acknowledge the unique gifts and contributions of each team member.

“Lesson 5: Geese help each other. When one becomes ill or injured and has to drop out of formation, one or two others fall out and stay with the weakened goose until the goose is well enough to fly again. Teams perform their best not only when leveraging the diverse talents of each team member, but also when they care for the well-being of each other and the team collectively. This is especially important to prevent caregiver fatigue and burnout.

“Get in the habit of using ‘we’ instead of ‘I.’ Share the credit and the load. And continually remind yourself: the biggest wins are us, not you or me.

“You have had the great privilege of learning with exemplary faculty and practitioners. You’ve had opportunities to engage with people of all ages and walks of life in our communities—learning with and from them as you have helped them and their families improve their health and quality of life. You have become not only competent practitioners but also gained the qualities to be everyday leaders.

“As you embark on or return to your career path, how will you be known? What personal qualities and attributes will you bring to your work? What value will you add? What are the unique talents and attributes that distinguish you and make you a person to remember? How will you make a difference? What will you do to continually learn and grow? Getting there will require extraordinary everyday leadership.

“Be a person to remember; do your work with a sense of purpose, urgency, and drive; deliver what you promise; continuously learn and develop yourself and your abilities; and make a difference in all you do. You are as ready as you will ever be to create the everyday leadership our health care system so desperately needs.”

Whether our students are preparing for their first job as a new graduate or advancing their career with additional education, the health care system, and life in general, is going to offer them numerous opportunities for everyday leadership. As nurse educators, we have a responsibility to help shape their identity as professionals who have the knowledge, interpersonal skills, and courage to engage in acts of everyday leadership throughout the course of their careers—to advocate for those they will care for, especially those who don’t always have a voice; to make their clients’ and patients’ experiences of illness and care safer and better; to speak for fair and just allocation of health care resources to ameliorate health disparities; and to be change agents in leading and shaping the health care system of the future, whether in their workplace or on a wider scale.

References

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