
Leadership in nursing: A frontline perspective

By **Caroline McGarry-Ross, RN, ENC(C)**

While there is no shortage of nursing leadership courses, books, seminars and conferences, they all seem to focus on leadership at a managerial level. No complaints here, a manager who can only manage but not lead, will ensure contracts are followed, employees are paid and policies updated but, without vision and leadership, their nurses, their units, hospitals and districts will never move forward. So, hurrah to the trend of combining management and leadership. But what about the front-line leaders?

What about those front-line nurses, who, day in and day out, make small consistent and valuable changes to our units? Why is it that a value has been placed on higher learning, implying that Master's-prepared nurses are naturally leaders in their field, yet little recognition has been placed on front-line nurses who, through volunteer committees, continuing specialty education, and even the writing of incident reports, can lead to and create change? Sometimes you just have to put down the binoculars and get in close to really see what is going on. One by one, and step by step, these frontline nurses are leading us forward through the ever-changing health care maze.

In World War I, nursing was still in its infancy. It was a time when only single women could work, and women had a muffled voice in the political and military arenas and, yet, nearly 3,000 Canadian nurses joined the war effort. Three thousand! That is a phenomenal number, even by today's standards when we have 126,000 nurses practising in Canada. Following the lead from World War I, 4,480 Nursing 'Sisters' enlisted in World War II.


Every single one of those nurses was a leader, showing the world that they were not just for working in hospitals and were not "too frail" to look after the badly wounded in less than ideal conditions. If you ever get the chance to read books about nurses in any of the wars, you will be surprised at the connection and the sense of pride you feel. It will help you to re-ground yourself and remember why you became a nurse in the first place. Why? Because, despite being miles from the luxuries of home, and often working in deplorable conditions, they dug in, worked really hard and made a significant difference. They charted a new path for all nurses and we have all followed gratefully in their footsteps.

I remember one book in which a nurse commented that once the area near the field hospital was bombed, "I rounded up my 100 patients and moved them to the mess hall where it was much more sturdy" (Rees Aikens, 1998). She didn't wait for direction or policies to be written, she simply did what had to be done and got on with it. That's true raw leadership and we still see it every day in hospitals across Canada.

Faced with completely different challenges, the emergency nurses of today dig in, work real hard and make a difference too. I see leadership when I watch experienced nurses patiently guiding new staff through the rhythm of the unit, speak with nurses who sit on one or more committees freely giving their time and ideas to try and improve things, and when I meet nurses from medicine and surgical floors who have left the comfort of being "senior" on their own floor to venture into the unpredictable and sometimes hostile world of ER.

The dates have changed, the hospitals are fancier and technology is both a friend and foe, helping us improve care while often simultaneously distancing us from caring. But we haven't changed. Nurses, frontline nurses especially, are still the type of nurse leaders we hear about from WWI. Leaders who will venture into uncharted territory, will welcome and mentor new staff, will look at the system failures from a ground-level perspective and a critical eye and will create changes that will help us muddle through this emergency mess we find ourselves in coast to coast.

I tip my hat to the nurses who have furthered their studies, earning their Master's and PhD degrees and moving into serious research and high-level management positions. I am proud of you. I am proud to be a nurse, period. But I am most proud of my colleagues. They inspire me, push me to do better, learn more and come up with better solutions.

They know, as I do, that sometimes, despite the less than ideal conditions, the best place to be is in the trenches...standing shoulder to shoulder with some of the finest Canadians I know. 

About the author

Caroline is a flight nurse with EHS LifeFlight in Nova Scotia, and works casual in emergency at the QEII hospital. She has been an RN for more than 23 years, spending four in the military and four in the reserves.

Interesting reading

Rees Aikens, G.M. (1998). **Nurses in battledress**. Halifax: Cymru Press.

Clint, M.B. (1934). **Our bit: Memories of war service by a Canadian Nursing Sister**. Montreal: Barwick.

Nicholson, G.W.L. (1975). **Canada's Nursing Sisters**. Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert & Co.

Wilson-Simmie, K. (1981). **Lights out: A Canadian Nursing Sister's tale**. Belleville, ON: Mika.

Websites

<http://www.trentu.ca/admin/library/archives/fnursesandww1.htm>

http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-71-855-4975/conflict_war/women_ww2/clip8 (Video clip)