There is an extraordinary quality of spirit that prompts one to aspire to lead. These nine principles will help you tap into that spirit and improve your effectiveness as a leader.

#1: Commit to excellence

As a leader you must be committed to your passion and purpose, and have the type of commitment that turns into perseverance. Many nursing leaders are committed patient advocates, clinicians, or employee advocates but the true test of commitment comes when it's difficult to get out of bed and go to work with a smile, yet you do because you know you are there to serve a purpose.

To get through these challenging times and make a difference, establish three priorities every 90 days and commit to seeing them through. Obtain your staff's insights on the priorities so the team will stay focused and have a stake into the strategic plan.

Commitment to excellence starts with the leader, so know in your heart that where you are is where you were placed to serve and share your skills and talents. If you question or have doubts about where you are, you may want to reevaluate your next move because eventually it will show through in your performance. This will allow you to fulfill your purpose, thereby increasing satisfaction for you.

#2: Measure the important things

**Service.** Patient satisfaction parallels staff satisfaction, so measuring employee satisfaction benefits the unit, department, and team. Develop realistic action plans to build employee satisfaction, involve all staff levels, and reassess every year. Become familiar and well versed with your patient satisfaction measurement tool. Share and explain data to your employees often.

**Quality.** Become familiar with and incorporate core measures into daily practice and communication. Make them breathe in your department. Convey to your team, staff, and other employees that patient safety and maintaining quality standards are a way of life. Develop unit- and department-specific performance improvement processes that the staff can articulate and implement in daily practices.

**People.** Be the resident role model; who you are is whom you will attract. Take notice of the employees who require a lot of cheerleading and motivating to do their jobs. They have a tendency to become negative when they don't receive feedback on a consistent basis and can infect the entire staff.

**Growth.** Develop unit-based and departmental volume projections and business plans. If you have a unit where you are not meeting your department average daily census or productivity, look for and measure potential growth opportunities. For example, if your unit is a 30-bed monitored surgical unit, develop a plan to add another service line similar to your existing clinical services. You may want to think about combining cardiac transplantation services with nephrology services and open beds for patients who receive kidney transplants.

**Finance.** Too often clinicians focus on improving people, quality, and service and leave finance far behind. However, your follow-through of your business plan for your unit or department will likely realize a financial savings, which can be reinvested into your clinical services. Build your unit-based financial plan for the year, based on your annual budget that includes salary, expenses, supplies, and capital requests. Use your biweekly and monthly financial reports to keep on target. When you are off target, develop a variance report with a specific and detailed action plan to get back on line for the next month. Share the report with your staff in monthly staff meetings, post it on a bulletin board for staff to see, and develop a staff financial newsletter to help staff understand how they play an important part in financial management on a unit level.

If you have a problem with meeting the standard for admissions, transfers, and discharges on your unit or in your department, create a bulletin board and display the number of delayed admissions, transfers, and discharges and how much it costs the organization to hold patients in the emergency department, intensive care unit, and other areas.

#3: Build a culture around service
Teach your staff to appreciate patients and families as their customers. Encourage them to use scripts and prompts when answering the telephones and consistently greet patients when entering and leaving their rooms. You may or may not have a new state-of-the-art facility and the latest technology, but if employees treat patients and their families with personalized care and compassion, they will always come back. Expect your employees to behave as if they worked in a five-star resort. Role model how to be a servant-leader. As the leader it is imperative to be humble, open, and available to learn every day. Remember, if you lead, they will follow.

#4: Create and develop leaders

An old adage is, “If your unit or department can run without you, you have done your job.” This is true, so develop your succession plan early. You can’t do it all alone. Identify your informal and formal leaders and invest in them. Take them to meetings with you; have them provide presentations to the staff and senior-level leaders. Find opportunities to highlight their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. Train them to be the next leaders.

#5: Focus on employee satisfaction

Make your work environment a great place to work. Celebrate what each individual employee can bring to the team. Make rounds daily to connect with your employees on the unit or in your department. Focus on establishing a relationship with each staff member by knowing their names and their child’s names. Send staff thank you cards and birthday cards, and recognize key events in their lives. Communicate with your employees frequently on all levels: An informed employee is a satisfied employee. Have daily team meetings or huddles to review pertinent information, new changes, celebrations, or other factors.

#6: Build individual accountability

It’s imperative to hold all employees accountable for the part they play in the overall goal. Develop a scorecard for each employee and meet with them every 3 months to measure their progress, accomplishments, and opportunities for growth. The SWOT approach—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—tends to work well. Provide employees with a copy of the SWOT document you complete when conducting their 3-month 1:1 meeting; be sure to write specific goals and dates for when they must be accomplished. This is an easy way to keep accurate records on each employee’s performance, which can be used when completing their annual performance evaluation.

#7: Align behaviors with goals and values

Set behavioral standards for all employees that are aligned with the organization’s values, mission, and standards. Celebrate the initiative of using the standards and have everyone sign a commitment. As a leader, role model the standards and use them in everyday conversation with your staff. Refer to standards when you’re developing or counseling staff.

#8: Communicate on all levels

To serve our patient population as an interdisciplinary team, we need to communicate as an interdisciplinary team. Incorporate support services, physician staff, and senior leadership into daily rounding on all units. Each week, have a member of a different department or service round with you and your staff on the unit or in your department; this will assist in fostering trust and opening the lines of communication. Invite senior leaders to your staff meetings so your staff can see the collaborative relationship that exists among senior leaders and frontline leaders.

If you are battling high turnover and vacancy rates, invite your recruitment and retention department to your unit or department to explain retention and recruitment efforts; this may stimulate your staff to refer a friend.

#9: Recognize and reward success

Too often we save recognition until Nurses Week, which may be too late to retain staff. Ongoing rewards and recognition go a long way to motivating staff and enhancing innovation and creativity. Offering words of praise and encouragement and taking the time to meet with your staff 1:1 say you are interested in them. Set goals and objectives for your staff and as they meet them reward them with a paid day off for relaxation, an all-expense-paid conference, a thank you note, or a small token of appreciation.

Success will follow

As a nurse leader you will face many trials while you’re blazing the trail of success. But if you make up your mind and manifest in your heart that you will stay committed and focused and build a team that will assist in meeting the goals and objectives in serving the community, you will be successful.

Don’t follow the path that lies ahead; instead, blaze a new trail!


Selected reference


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