

## Research

# Leadership in Research: About Building Relationships

**Linda O'Brien-Pallas, RN, PhD**

Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Toronto

Co-Director, Nursing Effectiveness, Utilization and Outcomes Research Unit

(University of Toronto site)

CHSRF/CIHR National Chair, Nursing Human Resources

**Although many assume** that conducting cutting-edge research in a particular field is synonymous with leadership, I challenge this assumption. I believe it is fair to say that just as many managers are not leaders, neither are all researchers. For many people, trying to learn the research process and to complete that first (or seventh) study seems to be an overwhelming task. In the world of research, completing the study is just the first step ... making the research come alive and using it to build capacity for future science and scientists and to tell stories that capture policymakers' attention and ultimately lead to policy change, are what it is all about.

Over the years, I have come to understand that leadership in research is about building relationships. Initially my relationships were with thesis supervisors and other deities whose words and mentoring were sacred. Later, as the playing field began

to balance and I had some research successes of my own, my collaborative relationships expanded to include colleagues engaged in research and future researchers. In the past several years, these relationships have developed further to include individuals who are challenged to use the scarce information from research to make decisions or to guide discussion of alternative policy choices. Each step of the way has brought new learning and clearer insight into what my role in the relationship should and should not be. Understanding myself and my individual quirks has helped me learn how to manage myself (most of the time) so that my behaviors do not encumber building these relationships. Without realizing it, I have been influenced by the leadership principles hypothesized by Kouzes and Posner (1997). The five leadership principles include: modeling the way, inspiring shared vision, challenging the process, enabling

others to act, and encouraging the heart.

In my career, I have been fortunate to have a great deal of protected time for research which provided the support necessary to build a research program and product that have substance as well as curb appeal. Initially, this was supported through 10-year funding from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) in Ontario for a Career Scientist Award. Most recently, through the Canadian Health Service Research Foundation and the Canadian Institute of Health Research Chair in Nursing Human Resources, I use my research and policy activities as a platform to link, educate, and mentor decision-makers, researchers, and the next generation of scientists in order to advance policy-relevant science and build capacity in research and decision-making arenas. Throughout the entire process, my journey has been enhanced by the mentors, colleagues, and mentees who gently (and sometime not so gently) pushed my thinking to strive for better designs and greater dissemination to a wider stakeholder audience.

Modeling the way involves rolling up your sleeves and working shoulder to shoulder, particularly when the going gets rough. Very early, I understood that I couldn't ask a team member or a student to do something that I was not prepared to do myself. This included copying, data entry, or any number of the less exciting activities involved in the research process. Involving young scientists in discussions with decision-makers, especially when decision-makers are not keen on

hearing the research findings and there are risks of undesired outcomes, is another important modeling behavior. In doing this, young scientists can observe the need for tact and diplomacy coupled with dead honesty in conveying the research message. They can also critique the process and identify strategies for improving communication in future situations. Modeling the way helps the new researcher to learn from the experiences of the mentor and to visualize him or herself in these situations while mentally practicing for future opportunities.

In the early to mid nineties it seemed as though no one, except nurses, was concerned about nurses, and the future health and well-being of the nursing workforce. The notion of quality workplaces contrasted with the mainstream view that nurses, so vast in number, were disposable resources and easily replaceable. Alarming concerns about the health of nurses, the outcomes of nurse layoffs, and restructuring of the healthcare system, as well as the realization that the aging baby boomer generation would constitute a looming shortage, did not resonate with the slash and burn mentality of the time. However in Ontario, we were fortunate that Elizabeth Witmer, then Minister of Health, responded to the concerns of the nursing community by establishing the Nursing Task Force. A shared vision between stakeholder groups, who often held disparate points of view, led to the development of policy initiatives directed at improving the recruitment and retention of nurses in the province. In this instance,

# People make a difference

One of Canada's largest teaching hospitals and among the largest employers in the city of Ottawa, The Ottawa Hospital is a unified, multi-campus system employing over 9,000 healthcare professionals. Our business is caring for people, and we believe this caring begins with our own employees.

Bring your commitment to excellence, passion for improving the health of the community and excitement in utilizing advanced medical technologies to our rewarding and challenging environment. At The Ottawa Hospital, dedicated people like you truly make a difference.

In return for your skills and dedication, you will enjoy a competitive compensation package, comprehensive benefits, ongoing training and the opportunity to advance with a truly respected industry leader. Relocation assistance may also be available.

For detailed information about The Ottawa Hospital and our employment opportunities, please call us at **1-877-580-6200** or visit our website.



The Ottawa Hospital | L'Hôpital d'Ottawa

[www.ottawahospital.on.ca](http://www.ottawahospital.on.ca)

research findings prepared by the Nursing Effectiveness, Utilization and Outcomes Research Unit were used to challenge the process and to tell the stories that led to targeted provincial policy. Since this time, I have established additional national and international relationships in an attempt to build further capacity to achieve the shared vision.

Enabling others involves mentoring with a special focus on helping the individual feel that they can achieve what seems impossible. Every PhD student recalls the time when completion of thesis requirements seemed just out of reach. Decision-makers have struggled with the notion of how to use "evidence" to guide decision-making when the evidence is sparse and the political fallout over one course of action over another is significant. In order to enable others to act, a leader must create an environment of trust and respect. Leadership in research means developing the capacity to be sensitive to those situations and assisting individuals to identify alternatives, to develop "self talk" to get through the challenge, and to move toward goal achievement. I have also learned that enabling others involves exposing and linking young scientists to opportunities where their talent and expertise can be recognized. This requires the leader to actively reflect on which opportunities will be best for launching the young scientist and letting go of the spotlight so that others can flourish.

Encouraging the heart, in my mind, is the most important leadership behavior in research. Barry Posner says

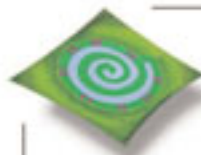
“people with high hope have more goals, achieve higher levels of organizational success and report greater life satisfaction” (B. Posner, personal communication, August 26, 2002). In the academic research world where success is measured by the number of grants won and the publications accepted, the broader public good of the research enterprise may get lost. Ensuring the adequacy of nursing numbers and creating work environments where nurses can provide optimal care for patients, are the principles that have always guided me in my research. Helping decision-makers use the evidence to change the environment is a considerable part of that work. Our team has been using the evidence to tell stories about how excessive workload influences nurses’ health, patient outcomes, and health-care costs. Yet, although the research and stories generated are used in the public debate, substantive policy changes about nursing work are limited and seem slow to come. Our team of decision-makers, students, and researchers has learned to find excitement in each small step, and this has sustained us for the greater purpose. Celebrating the small successes, which might not qualify on the academic achievement scale, has been the driving force that has allowed each of us to re-commit to the process of achieving the larger vision.

### References

Kouzes, J. and B. Posner. 1997. *The Leadership Challenge: How To Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing.

## **Congratulations... from us to you!**

Calgary Health Region extends our congratulations to the Academy of Canadian Executive Nurses on the re-launch of *The Journal of Nursing Leadership*. We look forward to the contribution this Journal will make to the continued development of leadership in the nursing profession.



Nurses at The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO)  
would like to congratulate  
The Academy of Canadian Executive Nurses  
on this exciting new phase in the life of  
The Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership!



CHEO is a specialized pediatric teaching, research and health care centre located in the nation's capital. Affiliated with the University of Ottawa, the hospital has a dedicated staff of over 1,800 including a vibrant nursing staff of more than 600 nurses. CHEO prides itself on a family-centred approach to caring for children and youth and an environment rich with compassion and hope.

**If your heart is leading you to pediatric nursing,  
let it lead you to CHEO!**

401 Smyth Road, Ottawa, ON, K1H 8L1  
[www.cheo.on.ca](http://www.cheo.on.ca)

Human Resources  
(613) 737-2245 Phone  
(613) 738-4233 Fax  
[personnel@cheo.on.ca](mailto:personnel@cheo.on.ca)

Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario  
Centre hospitalier pour enfants de l'est de l'Ontario

