

Judith Shamian: Be True to Yourself and Your Values



JUDITH SHAMIAN, RN, PhD is currently the President and CEO of the Victorian Order of Nurses. She formerly held the title of Executive Director of Nursing Policy with Health Canada and is a Professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Toronto. Judith was also the President of the RNAO from 1998 to 1999.

Dr. Shamian obtained her PhD from Case Western Reserve, Cleveland, Ohio, her Master's in Public Health from New York University and her Baccalaureate in Community Nursing from Concordia University in Montreal.

She has published and spoken extensively in North America and internationally. Dr. Shamian is known for her commitment to professional excellence in practice, education and research. Her continuous interest in healthcare politics and policy and international health is well known. She is the 1995 recipient of the Ross Award for Nursing Leadership and was awarded the Golden Jubilee Medal in 2002 by the Governor General of Canada.

What are the most important attributes for leadership? Why?

I believe that the most important attribute is vision – knowledge of and clarity about what you are leading people towards. Those who have worked with and for me tell me that I inspire them to work towards a vision in which I (and they) passionately believe. We talk about the vision a lot, and I convey confidence that we can and will get there.

The second most important attribute is passion – believing in something with all your heart and soul, and

being able to commit your efforts to achieving it. I am passionate about a lot of things, but the connections between several of those passions have shaped my career and my leadership success. I am passionate about nursing, and about the fundamental difference that nurses make for human beings every day. This passion inspired me through my early nursing leadership positions. I am passionate about the value of the Canadian healthcare system, and about the importance of policy in ensuring the sustainability of

that system for the future. This passion inspired me during my tenure at the Office of Nursing Policy. In fact, when I moved to Ottawa, I was thrilled to find that my small apartment had a view of the flag on the top of the Peace Tower – which could serve as a daily reminder of the importance of the work I had committed to there. I am also passionate about the importance of primary healthcare and community mobilization. It is these passions that have led me to accept my current position at VON Canada.

I also believe that emotional intelligence is an important attribute for leadership. If you wish to pursue your passions, you must be able to use your “self” with great skill. This means that you must know your strengths and weaknesses, be able to leverage your strengths and compensate for your weaknesses. You must also know others and be empathic to their passions, strengths and limitations. And finally, you must be able to use your relationships with others well and wisely.

Curiosity is a great asset for a leader. It leads one to discover opportunity and ideas around every corner. However, bright ideas and great dreams aren’t enough. You will require hard work and considerable stamina in order to succeed. When things don’t go the way you had hoped, it is critical to be resilient: to be able to bounce back, although perhaps in a slightly different direction. It is also advantageous to be opportunistic – to be able to seize a window of opportunity, or to see the silver lining of possibility in what might otherwise be a disappointment or a setback.

Finally, I believe that a sense of humour is incredibly helpful. Laughter is a good lubricant for any social interaction, but it is particularly helpful when tensions are running high – whether those tensions are due to the importance of the task or the sensitivity of the relationships.

How would you describe your leadership style? Who or what influenced you to adopt this approach to leading?

I would characterize myself as a relationship builder, both on an individual level and on a group level. I do not think that, just because a group of people happen to work for the same organization, they are automatically a team.

I work very hard to develop and support individuals, as well as a spirit of teamwork and collaboration, in order to get the best out of people and the best out of an organization. My goal is to get everyone in the organization committed to the same goals and objectives and to utilize their fullest capabilities in achieving those goals and objectives. It is very exciting to see that kind of clarity and commitment take shape and to see individuals and teams reach their full potential. I get the same satisfaction from mentoring graduate-level nursing students.

I am a very big proponent of transparency and encourage two-way communication. I do not shy away from debate and prefer a culture of openness rather than secrecy.

I would also characterize myself as a pacesetter. While I articulate clearly where we are going as a group, I

provide a lot of latitude for how we might get there – which leaves people free to innovate and experiment. I try to be aware of, and to listen to, how others feel, so that I can understand their perspectives.

However, I have no difficulty in setting high standards and expecting people to achieve them. There is no point in aiming too low, and I do not deal well with mediocrity. I push my staff hard to accomplish a lot, and I am impatient with poor performers.

The caution for me is that the pacesetter style can at times be overwhelming and my enthusiasm and high standards can be intimidating. When this happens, if my antennae aren't well tuned, I may miss the cues, leaving people feeling frustrated or "at sea."

Finally, I often see myself as a cheerleader for the agenda – keeping the vision clear, keeping it articulated and keeping enthusiasm for the agenda high.

While I was greatly influenced in the development of my leadership styles by people within the nursing profession, I was equally influenced by many individuals outside nursing who helped me understand politics, health policy, healthcare and how these all come together within the sphere of nursing. The most valuable piece, and what works best for me, is continuous, reflective thinking regarding what works, what doesn't work and what is appropriate for each situation. I do my best to ensure that people feel listened to and that my final decisions are fair and well thought out.

What is the most satisfying aspect of being a leader? What is the most disappointing?

The most satisfying aspect of being a leader is to see a vision or direction that has previously existed only in my own head come alive and become reality. I love to mobilize the agenda and make things happen. For example, building Mount Sinai Hospital to the world-class magnet nursing service that it is today, or taking the Office of Nursing Policy from startup to a well-respected and influential agenda-setter, both nationally and internationally.

The most disappointing aspect of being a leader is having to confront the reality that it will not be possible to implement every initiative or project, and that you must often trade off priorities against one another in order to remain within your means or your capacities. It is also very disappointing when people do not rise to the challenges presented to them, or even above their own self-interest.

Does leadership in nursing differ from leadership in other professions?

If so, how?

In many ways, no. The challenges of leading in today's complex world are well described in hundreds of books and thousands of journal articles, and they all apply to nursing.

However, there is an amazing and genuine altruism that moves most people to choose nursing. This altruism is also the reason that nurses continue nursing, even when their work and their working conditions are exceedingly difficult – witness the actions of

nurses during the SARS crisis, or the nurses working with AIDS in Africa. This altruism, and the nurses who embody it, inspire and humble nurse leaders. It is the stuff that keeps our batteries charged, and motivates us in a different way than can be possible for leaders in other sectors.

One challenge about leadership within nursing, however, is that nurses are less willing to engage in politics and to push their agenda with politicians than are many other groups and professions. Nurses are very fastidious about engaging in this type of activity, seeming to consider it somehow beneath them, distasteful or dishonest. As a result, nurses have often been and continue to be left behind. This is an incredibly frustrating situation for me.

Within your various leadership roles, how did you identify up-and-coming leaders? What do you look for in emerging leaders?

As I said earlier, in my view leaders are made, not born. I believe that anyone can acquire the skills of a good leader, much as they acquire the skills to be a good nurse. All that is needed most often is for these skills to be honed and polished.

What I look for in emerging and aspiring leaders is the ability to make decisions, to problem solve, to address issues in an up-front and direct manner and to inspire trust and confidence in others. I seek out people with an external vision, the know-how to connect, a sense that they have political savvy, the ability to think outside

the box and, perhaps unexpectedly, charisma. When I find such people, I work with them, support them, give them opportunities to grow their leadership style and prospects. In short, I am willing to mentor those with the potential for leadership.

What piece(s) of advice would you offer to aspiring leaders?

Twice each year I give the closing keynote address at the Dorothy Wylie Nursing Leadership Institute. I tell the participants that there are eight key steps to “unlocking the leader within.”

1. Be true to yourself and your values
2. Develop and nurture key relationships
3. Be accessible
4. Communicate
5. Stretch yourself
6. Make change – be strategic
7. Use power and politics to influence
8. Be a winner

Conclusion: Nurses can make a phenomenal contribution to the healthcare debate. Nurses have the knowledge, expertise and strength to make a huge difference. I strongly encourage nurses to step up to the plate and make that contribution, whether formally or informally, in the best interests of all Canadians.