

Vanessa Burkoski, 2012 Winner, Margret Comack Award for Nursing Leadership



From left: Janey Shin, Director of Medical Affairs at Johnson and Johnson Medical Companies; 2011-Winner, Sue Matthews; Vanessa Burkoski, 2012 Winner Margret Comack Award for Nursing Leadership; Lynn Nagle, Editor-in-Chief, *Canadian Journal of Nursing Leadership*; Elizabeth Kolb, Medical Initiatives Lead, Johnson and Johnson Medical Companies.

Vanessa Burkoski, RN, BScN, NP-PHC, MScN, DHA, was the recipient of the Margret Comack Award for Nursing Leadership, which was presented at the 2012 HealthAchieve conference in Toronto.

Dr. Burkoski is the vice president and chief nursing executive for quality, patient safety and professional scholarly practice at London Health Sciences Centre. Previously, she was Ontario's longest-serving provincial chief nursing officer. In this role, she provided strategic policy advice to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. She is responsible for conceptualizing and facilitating the implementation of a wide range of evidence-based, innovative program and policy initiatives, such as the Personal Digital Assistant program, the Ontario Nursing Workforce Alliance and the Long-Term Care – Emergency Mobile Response program.

Dr. Burkoski continues to provide nursing leadership through her active involvement on several provincial, national and international steering committees and working groups.

Dr. Burkoski has been described by her colleague, Mary Ferguson-Paré, as “a unique gift to nursing leadership in Canada. Her openness to ideas, capacity to see possibility and connection to what’s best for patients/families drives her leadership for innovation in nursing and inter-professional practice to create a better healthcare system.”

In the following interview, Dr. Burkoski shares her thoughts on nursing leadership, her leadership style and the factors that influenced it.

Q: What have you found to be the most important attributes for leadership in nursing? Why?

A: The most important attributes for leadership in nursing are honesty, confidence, emotional intelligence, creativity and the keen ability to listen and communicate directly with people. Sound nursing leadership requires acting with integrity by honestly and openly providing and accepting feedback that creates increased self-awareness. Nursing leaders must be willing to initiate necessary change and accept responsibility for choices made, whether the outcome is positive or negative.

The reason these attributes are important is that these qualities build trust, which supports the formation of sustainable, mutually satisfying relationships. I believe that leaders illuminate the vision, values and purpose of the core work that people conduct within the organization and effectively focus the team towards achieving success. As a leader who cares about people and demonstrates the desire to understand their concerns, I can generate team spirit and enthusiasm, which can mobilize change.

Q: How would you describe your leadership style? Has it evolved over your career, and if so, what were the most important influences?

A: My leadership style is closely aligned with transformational leadership principles, described by Bass and Avolio (1993: 112) as “idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration.” The opportunity to engage in meaningful interactions with others and to reflect on my behaviour and actions during the course of these encounters has led me to discover that trust is an essential component of leadership. Joseph and Winston (2005: 6) defined trust as “the level of confidence that one individual has in another’s competence and his or her willingness to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner.” I believe that effective nursing leadership requires the formation of trusting relationships, which are

built through the positive actions and behaviour that leaders demonstrate to others. My primary intent is to serve humanity and in doing so, lead others to grow and develop their ability to serve others.

Over the course of 29 years in my practice as a nursing professional, I have become keenly aware of the need to behave and communicate in a fashion that supports others to become critical thinkers and moral practitioners. I recognize that my espoused values serve not only to uphold my integrity, but also to mentor others to behave in morally responsible ways. Dialogue and collaborative experiences across many years of nursing practice have provided me with the opportunity to examine the evolution of my reality and the underlying rationale for my actions and behaviour. As a result, I have gained increased ability and confidence to question assumptions and explore new dimensions of knowledge and learning. I have gained an enthusiasm about challenging my conception of reality and questioning my assumptions.

Q: What is the most satisfying aspect of your role as a nurse leader? What has been the most disappointing?

A: The most satisfying aspect of my role as a nurse leader is the ability to navigate people effectively through the change process and teach others that they are capable of both embracing and leading change. I have experienced challenging times in the course of my career, but I have never felt disappointed as a nursing leader. Every new encounter with seemingly insurmountable barriers has brought renewed insight, knowledge and skill that have added to my nursing leadership toolkit.

Q: What role do you see for nurse leaders in advancing transformation of the healthcare system over the next five years?

A: Nurse leaders have a tremendous role to play in advancing transformation of the healthcare system. They can provide direction and focus in the process of strategic planning and development of solutions to address the gaps, redundancies and deficiencies in the healthcare system. In addition, nursing leaders can serve as mentors to facilitate the growth and development of future leaders, particularly in the policy domain of nursing practice. Understanding the politics of nursing and healthcare policy is critically important for ensuring that the right issues are elevated to a place on the government's agenda and that an action plan for health system transformation is developed to achieve positive health outcomes for Ontarians.

Q: What was the best piece of advice you were ever given in your career? Why?

A: The best piece of advice I ever got was to “stay the course.” I think that this advice was very influential in my career because it enabled me to maintain a commitment to the principles and values that I espoused in my practice and to navigate a pathway to achieve the goals that I had set for myself. Staying the course taught me to become flexible and recognize that meeting the needs of people first, by listening and asking questions rather than providing direction, was essential. My ability to provide others with the opportunity to steer the process and discover their own ability to identify the tasks that need to be completed to achieve success was derived from my focus on staying the course.

References

Bass, B. and B. Avolio. 1993. “Transformational Leadership and Organizational Culture.” *Public Administration Quarterly* 17(1): 112–21.

Joseph, E. and B. Winston. 2005. “A Correlation of Servant Leadership, Leader Trust and Organizational Trust.” *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 26(1/2): 6–23.