Sailing the “Seven C’s” of Leadership

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Nurses are increasingly being called upon to lead changes within health care. How do nurses and, in particular, school nurses become leaders? School nurses lead daily in their work but often do not recognize themselves as leaders. The “Five C’s of Leadership”—character, commitment, connectedness, compassion, and confidence—identified by Kowalski and Yoder-Wise are foundational to the development of leadership and are particularly relevant to school nurses and their role. Two additional attributes found in the literature—courage and capacity—also undergird school nursing practice. In this article, we describe how school nurses already embody these leadership qualities. Each leadership attribute is reviewed in light of the literature, followed by specific examples to demonstrate how school nurses provide leadership. Through these illustrations, school nurses can recognize and embrace their present leadership abilities. In addition, by using the “Seven C’s” of leadership, school nurses can enhance their inherent leadership abilities.

Embodying the Leadership Journey

How do nurses become leaders? NASN School Nurse and The Journal of School Nursing have frequent articles on leadership and editorials entreat school nurses to lead. These articles focus on nursing knowledge or skills needed to become effective leaders, but the actions to take can seem overwhelming (Cowell, 2012, 2013; Denely, 2008; Frenk et al., 2010; Galuska, 2014; Harshberger & Katancha, 2009; Huston, 2008; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010; Sheetz, 2007). NASN’s (2012) position statement on the role of the school nurse, as well as the Scope and Standards of School Nursing Practice, name leadership as a school nurse responsibility (ANA & NASN, 2011). Now, with the broad and sweeping changes in the health care delivery system and emphasis on teamwork and collaborative practice, nurses are being called upon to lead in the workplace and in society for better health care (ANA, 2014). These policy statements can also make leadership seem daunting. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that school nurses embody leadership characteristics in scenarios they encounter every day. Understanding these leadership characteristics can give school nurses confidence in moving forward and assuming expanded leadership roles. Leaders are not born, nor does a management position guarantee that the incumbent has the skills to lead (Goleman, 1996/2011). In fact, nursing leadership occurs in varying ways, often informally, and can happen at any level of practice (Spitzer, 2007). In particular, school nurses lead every day in their work, yet they may not recognize this or recognize the influence they have by virtue of their positions. According to Ladd (2009), “school nurses, by their multifaceted role, have more positional power than most staff members within the school. . . . The collaborative nature of school nursing leads to the development of personal power” (pp. 11-12).

How do school nurses get comfortable with leadership? Leadership is cultivated over time, does not occur in a vacuum, and is a process that involves self-growth (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007/2011; Goleman, 1996/2011). Kowalski and Yoder-Wise (2003) list “The Five C’s of Leadership” that are foundational to the development of
leadership: character, commitment, connectedness, compassion, and confidence. In addition to these attributes, we propose two additional qualities—courage and capacity—found in the leadership literature (Bennis & Thomas, 2002/2011; Drucker, 2004/2011; Galuska, 2012; Kotter, 1990/2011; Trent, 2004; Wilmoth & Shapiro, 2014). These seven characteristics develop along a continuum and, when cultivated, can shape effective leadership. The “Seven C’s” are particularly relevant to school nursing because they are the basis for school nursing work. By further developing these leadership attributes, school nurses can enhance their leadership capabilities. Table 1 lists the seven leadership attributes with a description and pertinent leadership references.

The Seven C’s of Leadership: Tools for a Successful Journey

Each of the Seven C’s will be reviewed in light of the literature, followed by specific examples to demonstrate how school nurses used that quality to provide leadership within their own practice setting.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Energy and dedication to a vision; keeping sight of goals.</td>
<td>American Nurses Association &amp; NASN, 2011; Minzter, 2005; Rosen &amp; Goodson, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Taking needs and experiences of others into account while communicating and acting.</td>
<td>American Nurses Association &amp; NASN, 2011; Apker, Propp, Zabava-Ford, &amp; Hofmeister, 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>Self-assurance; having trust in one’s own abilities; “can-do” attitude; having a positive and realistic view of one’s abilities.</td>
<td>Gilmartin, 2014; McBride, 2011b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>Competence or ability to perform at the highest level; varies by context; requires aptitude for critical thinking and ability to adapt and change.</td>
<td>Galuska, 2012; Trent, 2004; Wilmoth &amp; Shapiro, 2014</td>
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Example. In the 1980s, a school nurse early in her career sought to implement health prevention education in a high school. Though she followed district protocol on expanding and including new material, some concerned parents wanted this content removed from the curriculum, which ultimately led to a disciplinary meeting. Rather than take this as a setback or abandon her goal of preventive health education, she analyzed (with self-awareness and self-regulation) how she might better engage parents to accept the proposed changes. From this experience, she learned how she might work more effectively with those who held differing opinions. Her leadership actions led to prevention education being accepted the following year, with parental opt-out. This is an example of character, informed by courage, confidence, and commitment.

Commitment

Leadership involves commitment, which is both a responsibility that requires energy as well as dedication to
a vision (Minzter, 2005). Within individuals, families, schools, and larger systems, making changes takes time. As school nurses work at each of these levels, it is important not to lose sight of goals and to work step by step to achieve change. In the face of challenges and adversity, every day school nurses commit to providing health-related education and interventions to ensure that students are healthy and ready to learn.

Example. School nurses’ role in immunization management and providing information to parents who question the efficacy of immunization is a standard yet critical part of the job (ANA & NASN, 2011). Because of nurses’ commitment to health and the school nurse role as health expert with connections to the school, students, parents, faculty, community health providers, and facilities, school nurses use multiple communication pathways; they serve as leaders and are central to dissemination of health information that influences family as well as community decisions (Rosen & Goodson, 2013). Belief in the benefits of healthy students and a healthy community are a driving force behind this commitment and follow through.

Connectedness

This quality is a basis for school nurses’ leadership because of the nurses’ responsibility to manage daily interactions with multiple audiences and their collaborative role in providing health services for students. Connectedness is a social skill or “friendliness with a purpose” (Goleman, 1996/2011, p. 19). Having empathy and a sense of how decisions impact others helps to build and create relationships and connections (Goleman, 1996/2011; Kowalski & Yoder-Wise, 2003). Complex connections are a basis for school nurse leadership and for school nurse power.

Example. A school nurse surveyed parents to determine their understanding of school health services, following up with several focus groups of parents. Parents clearly identified needed services and became a voice for enhancement in school health services as part of a Coordinated School Health program. Through this interaction, the school nurse helped create a parent–school connection and a shared vision for improved health services.

Compassion

This attribute of leadership while caring is a tenet of school nurse practice (ANA & NASN, 2011). Compassion means building relationships by communicating and acting in ways that take into consideration the needs and experiences of others (Apker, Propp, Zabava-Ford, & Hofmeister, 2006). Because nursing practice is built on compassion, caring, and empathy, school nurses are skilled in this important tool of leadership.

Example. A school nurse worked with the family of a child who required complex care at school. The child’s mother called the school often with reminders and complaints about the care that her child was receiving. The school secretary, principal, and the child’s teacher became frustrated with the mother, minimizing their interactions with her. The school nurse understood that the mother’s behavior was likely an expression of her anxiety about her chronically ill child. The school nurse set up a meeting with the parent, principal, teacher, and school counselor to discuss a plan for actions to help the mother feel more comfortable and understood. This experience is one of many and common among school nurses who demonstrate compassion every day in their work.

Confidence

The confident leader embodies a positive “can-do” attitude, as well as self-assurance. Self-confidence means having a positive and realistic view of and a trust in one’s abilities (Gilmartin, 2014). Confidence is built upon successes over time and can be promoted by acting as if one is already assured. While encouraging nurses to take leadership seriously, McBride (2011a) gives this advice:

Don’t hesitate to “pretend” to be a leader. When you’re new in a role, you may not feel comfortable acting on your own authority at the start, yet you know enough to have a sense of what that mythical creature “the good leader” would do—so don’t hesitate to “pretend” to be one. (p. 11)

Example. An experienced nurse who was new to school nursing needed to develop a new protocol for managing diabetic students. As the only school nurse in the district and knowing that the procedure currently being used in the district was not best practice, she set out to update the methods that she would use to manage the student, train the health assistant caregivers, and communicate with providers. Initially, she met resistance to the proposed changes. The nurse knew that she had to demonstrate her assurance in making these changes because she was the health expert with experience, knowledge, and wisdom. Having confidence helped the nurse surmount obstacles that might have prevented this improvement in patient care.

Courage

This attribute is often neglected, yet it can be particularly important for school nurses who often feel alone among teachers, school administrators, and other staff. Courage involves the willingness to risk, the willingness to confront what needs to be done, and the desire to deal with significant problems (Drucker, 2004/2011; Kotter, 1990/2011). Standing alone, although at times distressing, can provide school nurses with a “crucible experience” that, upon reflection, allows growth in self-understanding and leadership skills. Crucible experiences are unplanned, difficult situations that lead to self-discovery (Bennis & Thomas, 2002/2011) and develop courage.

Example. A school nurse, covering in the absence of another, discovered a significant medication error with a month of multiple missed doses. Addressing this required courage. The nurse reported the issue to the school nurse manager so
that proper care could be instituted for the student and corrective actions could be put in place to improve the nurse’s performance. The courage to report and confront gave this nurse an opportunity to support the colleague’s self-esteem, while improving patient care.

**Capacity**

Developing capacity in self, colleagues, and students is an important school nurse leadership trait. Having the means, competence, or ability to perform at the highest level are characteristics of possessing capacity. Because of their expertise and knowledge, school nurses have leadership capacity and need to become aware of these strengths to enhance their ability to lead others (Trent, 2004). Along with awareness, lifelong learning in developing additional leadership strategies and skills is important; taking advantage of leadership learning opportunities in the workplace or in formal settings expands skills throughout a career trajectory (Galuska, 2012). Although not every nurse may aspire to a leadership position, leadership capacity, including strong interpersonal communication, critical thinking skills, and the ability to adapt and manage change, is important for every nurse (Wilmoth & Shapiro, 2014). Capacity is contextual and fluctuates over time. At any given time, a nurse may or may not have the capacity to function as a leader and must give himself or herself permission to act upon this. School nurses can lead where they are; at times, a nurse will take a key leadership role on a project and then step back to day-to-day functioning when the project is complete. Or, a nurse may have the capacity to participate in a leadership role (such as those in state or national school nursing organizations) at one time but may not at another, given personal or professional circumstances. Each act of leadership builds capacity to confront the next challenge.

**Example.** A school nurse who decided to become a committee chairperson in her state school nurse organization described her internal reflection. She related that she had previously served on the organization’s board and enjoyed the experience. After beginning graduate school, she felt the need to step down. However, once her degree was completed, her children were older, and she felt more grounded in her school nurse practice, she realized that she now had the physical, mental, and emotional capacity to volunteer for the open position. Becoming aware of one’s capacity is vital to being successful when embracing leadership roles.

**Where Are They Now?**

Each of the nurses whose experiences have highlighted one of the Seven Cs demonstrated only a portion of his or her leadership journey with that example. All expressed that early in their careers, they did not see leadership as one of their strengths. However, by building on their experiences, they each have developed into effective school nursing leaders. One serves as the school district’s director of health services and special education, another established a school-based health clinic, and another used her connections to help establish a community-wide response to the H1N1 influenza outbreak in cooperation with public health officials. Another serves in a key position in her State School Nursing Association. Several have continued their education and attained national certification as school nurses and one now serves as faculty in a school nursing graduate program. Not everyone desired a formal leadership position; one of the exemplar nurses acts as a consultant and as the “go-to” person with whom other nurses confer when facing a tough situation in caring for a student with complex health problems. Leadership can be official or unofficial, on the front lines of care, or in policy-level positions.

**Implications for School Nursing**

School nurses have intrinsic power and a capacity to lead and make a difference. When leadership is conceptualized in the contexts of character, commitment, connectedness, compassion, confidence, courage, and capacity, the relevance of the Seven Cs is evident. The examples provided for each of the attributes show how school nurses already embody leadership. School nurses are passionate and deeply committed to the health of children, can create strong partnerships, are adept at managing resources and validating the effects of nursing interventions on outcomes, are flexible and nimble in the provision of effective, efficient care, and have the knowledge and skills to make a positive impact on the health of communities. By focusing on the Seven Cs, school nurses can recognize and enhance their inherent leadership abilities.

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