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A Lasting Legacy

Nurse leaders, like many others, want to leave a positive legacy of what has been accomplished during our lifetime. We want to know we have made positive differences in the lives of others, specifically our patients and their families, our colleagues and friends. Legacy is about what we believe and how we act; to quote Elizabeth Edwards, it is a life shaped by “what we do, not what is done to us.”

It is a great feeling to know that we have made a significant difference. We particularly recognize the importance of leaving a legacy of honor, integrity, and value for life for our family.

The dictionary defines legacy as leaving great wealth or value to loved ones. Parents want to leave their children not just money, but a sense of having made a positive difference in their lives and furthering the generation lineage. Leaders want to leave their organizations in better condition, with a well-organized structure, efficient processes, and superb outcomes in order to ensure future success. Of particular importance is leadership development and mentoring.

Legacy has been described in a variety of ways; for example, when we speak about the initial information systems that were established in hospitals well over a decade ago, we refer to them as legacy systems. As antiquated as it may be, often without interconnectivity throughout the institution, that legacy system laid the framework for sophisticated systems that are at the core of supporting patient care today. Technology, however, is changing so fast that, in some cases, it is only a matter of months before current structures also wear the title of a legacy system.

Contributing to nursing's values and progress is a wonderful legacy. Many professional organizations overtly recognize nursing leaders who have made significant contributions to the growth and advancement of nursing and professional practice. There are numerous examples of nursing leaders who will continue to be known after their lifetime for their major contributions to the profession.

But what about the leaders who may not write about successes or speak to audiences about what has worked as they strive to continually enhance patient care and the quality of

the work life of their staff? These daily heroes leave many examples of their positive influence through others. Their impact continually provides positive patient care outcomes. Are they really forgotten after they leave, retire, or pass on? I don't believe so. That is because the truly good leaders know that the most critical legacy they can leave is through leadership development and the mentoring of others.

In business, this practice is considered good succession management, but it is much more. It is about nurturing individuals so they can succeed in whatever job they choose by helping them play to and develop their strengths and overcome their liabilities. Working with others to find the right job that will enhance their abilities is the sign of a creative leader, one who does not want his or her unit or organization to flounder when he or she moves on. Imagine putting one's energy and creativity into an organization without having the people to carry it on? That is a travesty.

Developing, supporting, and working with others is time consuming, but when mentors see the growth and accomplishment of their mentees, they know they are adding to the pool of remarkable practitioners and leaders in nursing. What better professional legacy could there be? This epitomizes the best nursing has to offer.

When we leaders think that we cannot make a long-term difference, we should think again. The best positive long-term impact is leaving a legacy of superb nurses.

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