What I Learned About Communication Through Coaching

by CAROL EBERT RN, BSN, MA, CHES
A fter many years in nursing, I thought I was a pretty good communicator. However, as a wellness specialist and educator, my ability to affect lifestyle change seemed to be limited. I certainly could tell patients and clients what to do to get healthier, but few seemed to follow my advice. So why did my expert advice not create change?

I discovered the reason after leaving my secure job to go out on my own. Lost and confused about what to do next with my career, I had a wise nurse guide me using coaching communication techniques. She kept her opinion to herself and led me toward discovering what I needed to do to bring joy back into my life again, which then allowed me to create the perfect plan for my next career path as an independent contractor. This change in energy and attitude happened after only three sessions with my nurse coach – and I didn’t need counseling! I was so amazed by the process and its power, that I immediately sought training to become a coach as well.

Over the past five years, I have been providing individual coaching to several hundred employees at a Fortune 100 Company. What I have noticed is they are so grateful to have someone willing to take time to listen to them and be vested in their well-being. It is very common for me to receive this kind of feedback:

“Carol helped me stay focused on my goals. I usually will make a plan and then quit. I didn’t want to quit because I knew Carol would be calling the next week. Eating right and working out are now becoming my lifestyle instead of a trend.”

Of course, I am grateful to be able to provide this service for them and am rewarded every time they make progress and share it with me—a win-win situation for both of us.

Data that I have collected from this company shows that coached employees have sustained health behavior changes, improved work/life balance, increased productivity, and decreased use of healthcare services. Thus the coaching intervention has been far more effective than the old “telling” method.

As a certified Mindful Coach Trainer, I also train nurses to become coaches in their workplaces. Nurse graduates from my coaching training program have reported great results once they shifted into using coaching communication skills. Several work in the health promotion department of a major medical center and are coaching patients on smoking cessation with much improved results. Another nurse is using coaching in her role in the Women’s Health Center as she guides clients on various health issues. Below are some other examples of how nurses are using coaching.

Improving Work Satisfaction

More and more nurses are dissatisfied with their work. A Nursing Times article (Girvin, 1999) describes the following cases:

One acute care nurse, feeling negative about his job and ready to leave, worked with a nurse coach who helped him take a different perspective. She guided him in moving forward with a new innovative idea and now he has a re-designed job where he knows he can make a difference.

A senior nurse, feeling unsettled at work and not knowing what she wanted, used a nurse coach to help her discover what she wanted from work, what she was good at, and what she enjoyed doing. Discovering the root of her dissatisfaction, she was coached on developing confidence and eventually negotiated a change toward a more satisfying role at work.

Reducing Stress and Improving Well-Being

Nursing is a stressful occupation. As more top-level professionals are leaving health care because of industry changes that affect their personal and family lives, many health systems are hiring executive coaches to retain leaders. Coaching is becoming a favored tool to assist professionals with work-life balance, employee motivation, resolving conflicts, lowering stress and work levels, and promoting overall well-being (Smeltzer, 2001). Coaching is becoming a “work perk.”

Rediscovering the Joy of Work

Many nurses have lost joy for their work. A group of nurse managers and educators in a small community hospital used a nurse coach to create new ways to support nursing staff and enhance leadership and communication skills. The coach didn’t offer advice, but guided others in discovering their own creativity, resourcefulness, and ability to love their work once more (Barber, 2002).

Enhancing Recruitment and Retention

As I reach the latter portion of my nursing career, I am keenly aware that we need to make some changes to retain older, more experienced nurses rather than making them obsolete. My belief is that training them to be coaches and connecting them with novice nurses would benefit retention on both ends of the spectrum. I know if I were asked to shift my role into coaching, I might not have left my position in health care to seek employment elsewhere.

What I have discovered is that nurses are perfectly positioned to become coaches because they are vested in the well-being of others and have a belief that people are capable of healing themselves with the right support. Coaches know how to provide that support by helping others discover the strengths and abilities that they already possess and how to best tap into their own personal power.

References


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