



ASPAN

American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses

Message from the President

Leading with Knowledge – Serving with Heart: Empathy in Servant Leadership

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Last time in *Breathline*, I described why I am drawn to servant leadership. For me, it is understanding the idea of intent. I like to believe that each person's intent is good. I like to believe that most people do not intend to hurt me. Maybe this is naive, but it is where I want to live my life.

There have been times when I would really get caught up in the drama of my unit. It's so easy to do, isn't it? Yet, if we are servant leaders, our role becomes being the person who reminds others about good intent. Show empathy and start the healing in that moment.

Empathy in Servant Leadership

The next two tenets of servant leadership are empathy and healing. Regarding empathy, Greenleaf states, "Servant-leaders strive to understand and empathize with others. They accept and recognize others for their unique gifts and spirits. One assumes the good intentions of a coworker and does not reject them as people."¹ The definition of empathy according to Merriam-Webster is "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner."² Simply stated, empathy is the ability to have that notion of walking in another's shoes. It is the capacity to understand the feelings someone must be experiencing as that person travels through certain challenges.

As nurses, we are called to be empathetic. I believe we are empathetic with our patients. But now the real challenge: are we empathetic to co-workers or component members? There have been times in my life when I have not acted with good intent, such as when I gossiped about a co-worker or let jealousy lead me astray. But I am older and wiser, and those tendencies make me pause and reflect now before I share some information. I try to think of empathy before I say something less than caring.

Conversations with Empathy

I believe there is good intent when I come across uncomfortable situations. In the book, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*, the authors suggest stopping before each conversation to remind yourself to "Start with Heart."³ Is this conversation going to be helpful and meaningful, or will it hurt and possibly demean the other person? Now, if I am angry or riled up, I do not start a conversation. I give myself time to think about what my truest intent is for that person. Is my heart in the right place and will I show empathy? If there is any doubt, I am not ready for that conversation to happen. Again, I am a work in progress.

Think good intent and empathy the next time you see a co-worker being shunned by a group because someone louder, or with a personal agenda, tries to direct your actions. Imagine the difference one person can make. Be empathetic.

Healing in Servant Leadership

Greenleaf's next described characteristic of servant leadership is healing. Empathy and healing go hand in hand. Once you feel empathetic, you will desire to heal. Greenleaf states, "Learning how to help heal difficult situations is a powerful force for transforming organizations. Servant-leaders recognize that they

have an opportunity to help make whole those people or institutions with whom they come in contact.”¹ One thing I have learned as a manager is that when someone chooses to leave my unit, I want to support him and encourage him to reach for his next career opportunity. This is healing to me, and I hope it is healing to the person leaving. I want this person to know I have valued his time with me and he is welcome to come back. Resentment and anger do not serve me well.

Hippocrates states, “Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity.”³ Building bridges and easing burdens fills us. It is an incredible opportunity to be part of healing something. In turn, we must ask, are we building people up or tearing them down? Are we taking those opportunities to heal our work place, or our components? We are healers, it is our calling. Therefore, we must be ever vigilant to find those opportunities to heal.

Embrace Opportunities in Your Own Life

Think about the opportunities that await you as a servant-leader. Reach out to others in your component and ask them for ideas and suggestions. Prevent others from turning away from them and their ideas. Show empathy and healing because we were all new once. Understand your true intent and acknowledge that we are human and we will falter. This is our chance to grow our components and ourselves. This can be an exciting opportunity so don’t miss it! This is how we will lead with knowledge and serve with heart.

REFERENCES

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2. Empathy. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy>. Accessed June 13, 2018.
3. Patterson K, et al. *Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes are High*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill; 2002: 27-44.