

Building Tomorrow's Transformational Leaders

The Other Side of the Front Line

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There are few positions that demand a more complex set of skills than managing staff on the nursing front lines. Nursing is part of a complex health care system. Constantly evolving, like an ecosystem, it is under pressure from economics, science, and human relations. To be successful in this field, you have to make tough decisions, but demonstrate caring. You have to be cognizant of strict guidelines, procedures and rules, but still be flexible. You must communicate well within your team, and also across diverse levels of the organization—doctors, front line nurses, clerical and other professional staff. Personal insight is critical to successful management in these kinds of dynamic work environments.

“You have to be a transformational leader—and to do this you have to know yourself,” says Liz Wojciechowski, who teaches Management and Transformational Leadership to Masters nursing students at North Park University, Chicago.

Wojciechowski uses the [Work Personality Index \(WPI\)](#) to help her students get to know themselves as they learn management skills. “For example, being organized is a real strength—but if you score at the extreme high end, you may lack the flexibility you need to make good leadership decisions,” says Wojciechowski. “Health care systems are like organisms, they are dynamic; fluid,” points out Wojciechowski. “You have to be organized but also adaptable and flexible.”

Students take the management class and their practicum over two semesters in the last year of their degree. In the first semester, Wojciechowski uses the WPI Personal Effectiveness Report. This helps her students gain insight into their own personal style, and also helps them analyze real-life case studies in class in a more tangible way. “Some will open up and share their own experiences if they are comfortable.” Wojciechowski then uses the Leadership Report in the second term, to add depth to their self-understanding in leadership roles.

Thinking critically about themselves and how they interact with others is essential to future success as managers. The WPI is an objective measure that helps students learn about their own strengths and weaknesses as they apply new knowledge, and share experiences in the classroom and in practical settings on the ward. Characteristics such as stress management, teamwork, and caring for others are measured by the WPI. “It is not just what we know about ourselves,” notes Wojciechowski, “but how we are perceived by others is also very important.”

There are many “aha” moments for students as they see themselves in different contexts, “I had

one student who was dealing with a very stressful situation—reassigning nursing staff from a plastic surgery unit to an orthopedic unit. This student handled stress very well, but what was happening was her team felt she was almost nonchalant, and did not care about the challenges and stress they were going through.” Conversely, someone who appears to care too much may be perceived as not being able to make unbiased, difficult decisions. “Our strengths can also be barriers.”

Liz Wojciechowski is an associate professor, teaching management and transformational leadership to 2nd-year Masters nursing students at North Park University, Chicago. As well as being a skilled educator, Wojciechowski is a practicing nurse, with a background in clinical research and mental health. She has a PhD in Public Policy, and consults in program monitoring and feasibility. Her work has been published extensively in many areas, including quality improvement and collaboration between public health and academia.