Mentoring Future Leaders

In the first 3 parts of this series, the author defined the need for a clear, compelling vision; building a team to work toward that vision; and the importance of collaboration to achieve the goals of the team. In this final section, the author explores mentoring as the fourth essential leadership skill.

A key element of leadership that is often overlooked or undervalued is mentoring. A mentor is a wise and faithful counselor, a trusted adviser. Mentoring is hard work and time-consuming because it means investing your time and energy into a personal relationship that may not generate immediate results. Why does good leadership require mentoring? Good leaders are visionaries who think ahead and want to ensure that the organization or team will continue to grow and prosper beyond their leadership. Good leaders recognize leadership qualities in others and use their influence to foster these skills and encourage development of new leaders. Effective leadership also ensures a smooth transition of authority during times of change.

The lactation consultant profession today faces some generational challenges. The demographics of International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) indicates that many are in their 40s and older, an aging trend that is also of concern in other helping professions such as nursing. If you are a leader in lactation today, what are you doing to help identify and encourage the future leaders of our profession?

Lactation consultants are skilled at nurturing mothers and babies. We sometimes don’t recognize the need to nurture our coworkers as the future leaders of our respective organizations. Leadership expert John Maxwell1 uses the acronym BEST to describe what it takes to help develop a future leader:

Believe in them
Encourage them
Share with them
Trust them

It’s Not About You, It’s About Them

Mentoring future leaders means truly knowing the person you are trying to advise, trusting in them, and believing in them. It’s not about trying to duplicate yourself, someone who will respond and act just as you do. When asked how he created his masterpiece, David, Michelangelo replied that the sculpture had always existed within the rock; he just chiseled away the stone around it. “It takes a leader with vision to see the future leader within the person,” says Maxwell.1 As leader of a team of IBCLCs in Oklahoma, one of my responsibilities is identifying the strengths in each team member and nurturing them to make the best use of those strengths. One person has the gift of shepherding teen mothers. Helping her make the community connections to become involved in classes for teen mothers led to her being asked to sit on an advisory panel leading future program development. Another IBCLC, who has wonderful counseling skills with mothers, sometimes found herself challenged by communication with other health care team members. Helping her talk through a particular occurrence, identifying what was misunderstood, and then discussing how to approach the nurse or physician directly in a sincere, professional manner gave her the confidence to deal with difficult situations. She now helps newer team members with some of the same challenges. “When you believe in people, you motivate them and release their potential.”1

Expectations and Accountability

Helping future leaders develop their potential also means setting expectations and holding them accountable. For example, a leader absolutely must exhibit a positive attitude. Attitude affects the entire team. The expectation to serve as a leader in the International Lactation Consultant Association (ILCA) requires a positive attitude to effect change. Board members or committee chairs who allow a negative environment to develop will see their ability to recruit volunteers decline as people become discouraged and stop participating. The negative environment becomes self-perpetuating as fewer people are available to handle the workload or the committee members feel that nothing is being accomplished.

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Mentoring leaders means being respectfully honest by helping them to identify the impact of their attitude or behavior on those they are leading and then holding them accountable to make changes for the better. As lactation consultants, we are often reluctant to address leadership challenges such as this because we “don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.” Yet mentoring a future leader requires honesty on our part, not ignoring a problem in hopes that it will go away. If the people you are advising believe that you truly care about them and sincerely desire that they be successful, they will appreciate direction on how to improve their leadership skills. As Maxwell1 says, “Share with them.” Share a story of how you faced a similar challenge and how you had to change your behavior or attitude to achieve a more successful outcome.

Trust Them

People will not follow a leader they do not trust. Trust is one of the most important factors in any relationship, whether it’s between individuals or organizations. A successful mentoring relationship rests on trust. Initially, it requires that you establish trust with the person you are nurturing, just as you establish trust with a mother you are counseling about breastfeeding. Christian leader Cheryl Biehl once said, “One of the realities of life is that if you can’t trust a person at all points, you can’t truly trust him or her at any point.” Ways a leader can break trust include gossiping, breaking promises, withholding information, and being dishonest. Once trust is lost, you have to work extremely hard to regain it. If you are mentoring someone and then turn around and gossip about that person, you will destroy the trust that person has in you. How can people believe that you truly desire what’s best for them if you are breaking confidence with them? As ILCA president, the board trusts me to make decisions at times without their input. They know and expect that all information will be made available to them as soon as possible. No secrets are kept from them; transparency is the key to the trust they have in me.

On the other hand, as a mentor, you have to also learn to trust the person you are mentoring. You have to encourage that person to handle situations independently, which sometimes means trusting that he or she can handle situations outside his or her comfort zone. Recently, I assigned one of our IBCLCs a new challenge—oversight of the launch of our expanded outpatient service. This assignment is a big responsibility and one that the team would normally assume that I would handle. I know this person can handle it because she has the trust of the other team members, always has a positive attitude, understands the vision of our service, and is committed to it. It also means a change in her work routine, so it requires some sacrifice on her part to lead the initiative. I have to trust in her ability and that she will seek my advice when she needs it.

As leaders in lactation, we have to nurture our next generation of leaders. We cannot be threatened by their success. In fact, if we want our profession to continue to advance, we need leaders who can take over from us and be even more successful than we were. As I finish my term as ILCA president, I turn over the position to Angela Smith. I trust Angela and her ability to continue nurturing ILCA’s role in leading our profession. I expect that the leaders in our profession today will take the time to be effective mentors of new leaders because we have extraordinary things to achieve, and we need good leaders to lead the way.

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