

# THE BENEFITS OF A LEADERSHIP PROGRAM AND EXECUTIVE COACHING FOR NEW NURSING ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS: ONE COLLEGE'S EXPERIENCE

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Despite attention given to the nursing shortage and now the nursing faculty shortage, what is perhaps less visible but equally critical are the pending retirements of most of the current cadre of academic nursing administrators in the next decade. With only 2.1% of current deans, directors, and department chairs in 2006 aged 45 years or younger, there may be a pending crisis in leadership development and succession planning in our nursing schools and colleges. This article describes an innovative leadership development program for largely new nursing academic administrators, which combined a formal campus-based leadership symposia and executive coaching. This article is particularly useful and practical in that actual case studies are described (albeit modified slightly to protect the identity of the individual administrator), providing a real-life narrative that rarely makes its way into the nursing academic administration literature. The executive coaching focus is very sparsely used in nursing academia, and this college's success using this professional development strategy is likely to become a template for other institutions to follow. (Index words: Coaching; Executive coaching; Leadership; Academic nursing administrators; Leadership program) *J Prof Nurs* 25:204–210, 2009. © 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**P**ARALLEL STRATEGIES TO address the nursing shortage are to increase the number of registered nurses to deliver care and to prepare new faculty to

educate the next generations of nurses. However, what is overlooked is the pending shortage of nursing academic administrators, including deans, directors, and department chairs, who lead nursing academic units throughout the United States. Startlingly, according to 2006 American Association of Colleges of Nursing data, only 2.1% of deans and directors are younger than 45 years! Further, according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2007), a large percentage of senior nursing faculty members will retire over the next 5 years, and half of the current nursing faculty members are likely to retire by 2016. These senior faculty members also play key administrative roles that will need to be filled when they retire. Because of the high numbers of current academic administrators who are transitioning to either retirement or other roles, a systematic approach to succession planning in schools or colleges of nursing is essential. As current deans, directors, and department

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chairs contemplate moving on, they need to focus on providing the next generation of academic administrators with the knowledge and skills needed to survive and thrive in academia.

Concerns about the pending shortage of nursing academic administrators must be considered in light of the complex role of the nursing academic administrator. Unlike deans, directors, or chairs in nonclinical disciplines, nursing academic administrators have the added responsibilities of clinical placement legalities, patient care issues, clinical and laboratory budgetary issues, state board and accreditation requirements, and a critical nursing faculty shortage. The position of a nursing academic administrator requires knowledge of budget, politics, policies, accreditation requirements, curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, and management. It is the nursing academic administrator who will directly impact change in reference to faculty teaching and course load, achievement of benchmarks, resources that the academic unit receives, recruitment of new faculty, and the conditions under which the faculty and the academic unit produces or fails (Chu, 2006). The requisite skill set for a nursing academic administrator is not acquired overnight but rather through a deliberate, executed development plan over time. Very few faculty members are formally prepared for the role of the nursing academic administrator. From the first day, the new nursing academic administrator finds that the disciplinary and scholarly skills that were primary criteria for success as faculty members have little to do with the new requirements of leading and managing a nursing department (Chu). A formal leadership program coupled with executive collaborative coaching is essential for the new academic administrator to succeed in his or her new role.

A systematic approach to academic nursing leadership planning that includes a leadership program and collaborative model of executive coaching was designed for new nursing academic administrators at Drexel University to foster the transformation process from faculty to administrator. In 2006, Drexel University College of Nursing and Health Professions had a very large, complex undergraduate and graduate nursing program from an administrative perspective. There were 3 bachelor of science in nursing tracks, 10 master of science in nursing (MSN) tracks, and 1 doctor of nursing practice program (Dreher, Donnelly, & Naremore, 2005) that enrolled 1,500 nursing students and employed 60 full-time nursing faculty members and 200 adjunct faculty members per quarter. Over a 2-year period, several experienced administrators were promoted to other positions in the college or left the university to follow other pursuits. After conducting a search, the college hired or promoted faculty with extensive faculty experience but minimal formal administrative experience to assume these roles. Because of increased student enrollments, hiring of numerous new faculty and changes in administrative and faculty reporting lines, the associate dean felt an overwhelming need to provide education, guidance, and mentorship to

the administrators that reported directly to her to form a more cohesive administrative team. Although some members of the team were not new to the college, they were new to reporting directly to the associate dean and working with other departments within the college. In an effort to provide these new academic administrators with a formal development program and support, the associate dean for undergraduate nursing and health professions, MSN programs, and continuing nursing education and the assistant dean for special projects developed a series of workshops entitled, the Leadership Symposium Series, for new academic administrators. The formal leadership series was presented first so that new administrators could benefit from a general discussion of academic leadership and management issues. The symposium series was held off-campus in a pleasant setting where breakfast and lunch were served. Attendance was mandatory. After the leadership series, individual executive collaborative coaching sessions were conducted with novice directors and associate directors. For this article, the terms *academic administrator* and *director* will be used interchangeably.

### Leadership Symposium Series

The Leadership Symposium Series was designed to provide leadership content through an interactive learning process. The Leadership Symposium Series formal topics included the following: “motivating faculty to be productive teachers, scholars, and citizens”; “balancing faculty ‘wants’ with administrative ‘needs’”; “fostering a positive, productive climate”; “know thy student profiles...and what to do with them”; and “exploring your program outcomes: Are you meeting your goals?” As suggested by Christensen (2004), leaders need to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, have a clear purpose of their role within the institution, discuss what motivates them, and be able to reevaluate and still implement sound decision making particularly when their own values that may differ from some faculty who report to them. The goals of the symposium were to develop strategies to address faculty issues in a forthcoming manner and to increase awareness of the role of the academic administrator within the organization.

The presentation topics were presented by several “seasoned” directors in the college and the associate and assistant deans. Ground rules were established for the sessions, which included the anonymity of individual faculty members during discussions, respect for diverse opinions, and open communication.

In Session 1, motivating faculty to be productive teachers, scholars, and citizens, directors identified factors that motivate faculty, teacher productivity, scholarly productivity, citizenship, as well as elements to create and support a culture of enrichment and positive energy in the college. Faculty issues discussed during the presentation were generated from faculty feedback regarding faculty members' perceptions of their faculty role and academic life. Directors were also asked to identify one faculty member who reported to them

who may be feeling “stuck” in his or her current position and who may be trying to “find his or her niche” in the current work environment—how might they mentor him or her?

In Session 2, balancing faculty “wants” with administrative “needs,” directors discussed faculty scheduling issues such as managing faculty teaching requests, dealing with changes (leaves, switches, and promotions), dealing with special requests, and maintaining equity and fairness in the process. A discussion focused on factors that may impact quality of teaching including faculty perceptions and values. The case study concentrated on effectively managing conflict between a faculty member and student and being sensitive to both parties.

In Session 3, fostering a positive, productive climate, directors discussed the expectations of an academic administrator, with particular attention to academic climate, budget management, program meeting management, faculty and staff evaluations, legal issues relevant to academe, and challenging personnel issues. The following case studies were presented and discussed: (a) Faculty members complain about a staff member who is rude and does not want to help them. He or she, however, is always very nice and helpful to the director. How should the director handle this situation? (b) A tenured faculty member who is argumentative and very negative continues to pull rank during meetings. The other faculty members feel that they cannot say anything because he or she is tenured. How might the director intervene being a nontenured faculty member? (c) It had been brought to the director's attention that a faculty member is exceedingly friendly with students. In conversation, he or she speaks about his or her students as friends and is regularly seen on campus at local bars drinking with his or her students after class. Is this behavior acceptable or not, please defend your answer. (d) During meetings, a faculty member always seems amenable to decisions made. After meetings, however, he or she routinely tells faculty individually how he or she disagrees with the decision and attempts to block implementation. What should the director do in this situation?

In Session 4, know thy student profiles...and what to do with them, directors discussed the student demographic profile and benchmarks of their respective programs and compared their program with other local, regional, and national colleges and benchmark schools. Directors were asked what they envisioned their programs to look like in the future with respect to the data discussed. In addition, directors were asked to identify the best teaching and learning strategies for different generations of students.

In the final session, exploring your program outcomes: Are you meeting your goals? Directors discussed the creation of a new alumni and employer survey to capture pertinent data in addition to setting realistic outcomes for students in their respective programs. Case presentations focused on analyzing meaningful data and factors that contribute to positively and/or negatively affecting their program outcomes.

Participants in the symposium offered many constructive ideas related to improving motivation; fostering a positive, supportive work environment; and creating a balanced academic lifestyle. Interactions among the administrators were always collegial during the sessions. The following guidelines for leadership emerged from the symposium discussions:

1. Communication
  - Clearly communicate expectations to faculty and staff.
  - Reach out to employees—get to know them and invite small groups to lunch.
  - Avoid lengthy e-mail discussions and meet face to face with people whenever possible.
  - Respond to faculty within 24–48 hours to messages.
2. Recognition
  - Reward and recognize faculty in meaningful ways both via e-mail, e-mail blasts, and in person.
  - Allow 30 minutes during faculty meetings to facilitate discussion on topics submitted by faculty before the meeting.
  - Have a system of meritocracy.
  - Celebrate faculty accomplishments.
3. Decision making
  - Increase opportunities for faculty to provide input in decision making.
  - Maintain a responsive feedback system for faculty members to receive timely information regarding their voiced concerns.
  - If you do not have enough information to warrant a decision, take the time to collect the data so that you can make a more informed decision, not based on emotions or perceptions.
4. Leadership style
  - Reflect on your personal leadership style, interactions, strengths, and weaknesses periodically.
  - Maintain a leadership presence.
  - Focus on equity and fairness.
  - Maintain confidentiality—as an administrator, you now have access to a great deal of personal information.
  - The best way to be an effective director/department chair is to find out who are the best administrators on campus and develop good communication and relationships with them.
  - Maximize the talents of your faculty.
  - Be humble and open minded.

These guidelines inspired the directors, and they agreed to reflect on how to integrate them into their personal styles and their academic life. They recognized the importance of valuing other's opinions, creating a positive work environment, modeling good team work, and continuing the commitment to leadership and management development. Acknowledging that “employee motivation is inextricably tied to an organization's leadership” (Latham & Ernst, 2006, p. 191), they felt that the symposium had given direction to their new

positions. The associate dean and the assistant dean of special projects who designed the Leadership Symposium Series were pleased with its outcomes and moved on to providing the second phase, individual coaching for each of the academic administrators.

### Executive Coaching

Many organizations, industries, and business are now using executive coaching to support the development of managers, supervisors, CEOs, and so forth. Executive coaching is a collaborative partnership designed to assist the executive, the coachee, in identifying and obtaining desired results.

There are several national training organizations such as the International Coach Federation and the Coach Training Alliance that establish and maintain criteria for professional coaching. They have identified the common factors of good coaching to include a powerful relationship between the executive and coach, agreement on a plan to achieve desired goals, increase in the executive's self-awareness, management of accountability for progress, and finally, achievement of desired results (Hughes, 2003; Hutton & Angus, 2003). Coaches must create a safe, supportive environment that produces mutual trust, honesty, openness, consistency, and respect (Kowalski, 2007). Coaching is not psychotherapy, and coaches must explicate the difference and refer out to mental health practitioners when appropriate.

The International Coach Federation (2007) defined coaching as the follows:

Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential...Coaches are trained to listen, to observe and to customize their approach to individual client needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client; they believe the client is naturally creative and resourceful. The coach's job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources, and creativity that the client already has. (p. 1)

Coaching can be characterized as that which is aimed at skill development, such as learning to conduct meetings, or coaching that is focused on achieving better performance outcomes, such as becoming accountable for project deadlines. Another type of coaching, developmental coaching, was chosen for our work at Drexel (West & Milan, 2001). Developmental coaching provides a safe space for the coachee's reflective learning and may or may not always be specific to behavioral goals. For example, the focus may be on building awareness of style, of communicating in a way that intent matches impact, or of gaining greater self-confidence in positions of authority. This requires a deeply trusting relationship with the coach as attention is placed on personally relevant results which develop over time. For example, an executive may need to become aware that he or she is perceived as believing that only his or her way is the right way. He or she may need to learn to listen before jumping in and

interrupting others with his or her good ideas. He or she may need to create better boundaries between himself or herself and his or her peers. He or she may need to communicate that he or she has empathy for others. These are aspects of communication that require breaking old habits, learning new ones, and practicing over time.

### How Coaching Works

To create change, one needs to start with identifying the current state of reality, comparing it with what is desired, and examining the discrepancies between the two. It is from the discrepancies that specific coaching goals are generated. Establishing data on the current reality can be done in different ways. Sometimes the executive's self-report is enough. Sometimes the executive's self-report and their direct supervisor can together identify what is current and what needs further development. It is sometimes the case, however, that managers rate themselves higher in managerial competence and leadership effectiveness than do their staffs (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998) or others with whom they work. This tendency often exists at all levels of authority. Therefore, in some cases, it can be important to gain perceptions from subordinates and peers and compare them with the coachee's self-perceptions. This data collection process is called *360-degree feedback*. In this process, the same questions are given to a wide range of personnel with whom the coachee works. The questions might be asked in the form of a survey, or interview protocol, or both. The resulting data identify the strengths and weakness of the coachee, raise their awareness of problem areas, and become the basis for goal setting. Data from this feedback process may or may not be written in a formal report depending on the contracted agreement.

In addition to the 360-degree feedback, other data may be collected in the form of personality and performance-style inventories (Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997), such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the DISC Profile, (DISC profile personality test measuring dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness) and the FIRO-B Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior Assessment. These different profiles do not assess competencies but add information on styles of communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving. These assessments can create important insight along with the 360-degree feedback.

It is clearly very important to find a coach that is a good fit for the institution. Coaching is a skill of questioning, effective listening, and giving feedback to promote learning, self-awareness, and action. Therefore, the coach must have excellent interpersonal skills, analytic and intuitive skills, and a willingness to hold the client accountable for the results they have agreed to pursue. They need to show credibility in education and training and appropriateness for the arena in which they are coaching. For working with nursing academic administrators, they hopefully have a working knowledge of the academic world, of individual dynamics, and of how large

systems work. Disciplines such as psychology, education, and business provide credible backgrounds for these skills. The best way to find a coach is through referral by trusted colleagues followed by personal interviews.

### Drexel University's Coaching Experience

Coaching is often brought into organizations to evaluate and address problems with an employee's work performance. At Drexel University, the decision for developmental coaching with directors was based purely on proactive measures to ensure the success of potential leaders facing new professional challenges and job skills. Each novice director had already demonstrated achievement and potential, which is why they were promoted. Each of them had already demonstrated excellence in their clinical and teaching capacities and showed high potential for leadership development, but most had not had any previous administrative responsibilities.

The executive coach selected to conduct the developmental coaching was both a clinical psychologist and an organization development specialist, an integration of skills that would support each director's transition. This decision to spend time and money developing nursing academic administrators demonstrated a commitment to developing a strong administrative team, trusting the potential of each new director, and acknowledging the fact that learning new responsibilities takes time, assistance, and patience. This commitment of tangible support contributed immeasurably to the success of the coaching process.

A wide range of issues challenged the new directors. Some directors were promoted from faculty positions and needed to assume authority with former faculty peers. They would now be making decisions that affected work load distribution, teaching schedules, clinical placements, and the evaluation of performance. This shift in relationship required a boundary adjustment. It was no longer appropriate to share certain information or to let personal feelings be known about colleagues or administrative decisions. In addition, it meant that, to appear in charge, challenges needed to be discussed with senior leadership, not with colleagues who might have served as previous sources of support. Some new directors appreciated for the first time the loneliness inherent in leadership positions. One director was new to Drexel and hired to be in charge of a large department that was undergoing huge growth and structural change. She was overwhelmed with the task of needing to learn systems that were totally unfamiliar and yet making decisions that affected large numbers of faculty and staff. Another newly appointed director came from within Drexel but with an entire department that had formerly been independent of the reporting structure now required. She needed to integrate her department into the nursing school which posed emotional and administrative challenges.

The list below is a summary of the specific challenges facing new directors as they transitioned into positions of administrative authority. In some cases, these challenges were converted into specific coaching goals:

1. learning to exert authority and be assertive,
2. managing conflict,
3. learning to say "no,"
4. letting go of perfection in the service of getting things done,
5. balancing relationships and task accomplishment,
6. learning that it was safe to ask questions and not needing to always appear as an expert,
7. developing listening skills,
8. creating visibility outside the nursing programs and within the larger university,
9. managing time,
10. managing self-care in the midst of stress,
11. modulating emotional reactivity, and
12. finding and developing a personal style of leadership presence.

### Steps in the Coaching Process

The coaching process for each of the directors involved the following steps: (a) The coach met with the associate dean to explore her assessment of the director's strengths and challenges. (b) The coach met with each director to hear what he or she perceived as the primary challenges to his or her development. (c) The coach, director, and associate dean met to share their perceptions and identify coaching goals. Structuring the first three meetings in this way created the time and space for the director to identify his or her challenges separately from the associate dean's analysis of his or her strengths and challenges. Any discrepancies between the two became an important discussion point in identifying developmental needs and agreed-upon goals. This process created a three-way buy-in to the coaching goals and left no room for disparate perceptions. (d) Five to seven coaching sessions followed. The sessions were designed as individual sessions, except for the occasional meeting with another director to share work styles based on the MBTI, which was the only personality profile used with all the directors.

### The Role of the Associate Dean

The associate dean was a part of the coaching process, a factor that was a great asset to the coaching outcomes. She had initiated the coaching project, had chosen the new directors who would be coached, knew that they would work hard to accomplish their goals, and was clearly a major support/advocate to the process. She felt strongly that, as senior faculty and a role model, it was incumbent upon her to live her values and also share what she felt to be her main guidelines for good leadership. She provided these guidelines in the initial goal setting meeting. Her 10 guidelines are as follows:

1. Assume a role model position.
2. Give both positive and negative feedback in a timely manner.
3. Go the extra mile.
4. Maintain a leadership presence: Look like you are in control even if you are not. Get back to people later when you arrive at clarity.

5. Make data-driven management decisions based on evidence and not emotion.
6. Follow policy.
7. Have integrity and irreproachable ethics.
8. Don't sweat the small stuff.
9. Maintain equity and fairness above all else. Make no deals. If there are extraordinary circumstances that merit an exception, document the situation and place it in the person's file.

Coaching contracts often have agreements that there is 100% confidentiality between coach and coachee and that no information is shared with the “boss.” In many circumstances, this is necessary to protect the safety of the coachee. At Drexel, given that the coaching was granted by the associate dean as a vote of confidence in the directors' leadership development, the boundaries were looser. In addition to the associate dean's participation in goal setting, the coach encouraged the directors to use the associate dean as a mentor who knew their developmental goals and to ask her for feedback on decisions, to pop a head into her office to ask a management question, and to brainstorm alternative ways of handling situations.

### Coaching Case Studies With Nursing Academic Administrators

**Case 1.** Dr. Saunders was promoted to director after years of teaching excellence at the university. Her developmental needs included becoming assertive, dealing with conflict, finding a leadership presence, performing responsibilities with greater confidence, articulating opinions within the executive nursing council, and becoming more visible within the larger university system. Dr. Saunders worked closely with Dr. Peters, a new hire, who was her subordinate and associate director and who had extensive administrative experience at an institution other than Drexel. Together, they inherited a complex department that channeled large numbers of students into different specializations at a time when the structure for these programs was in flux. Dr. Saunders felt responsible for helping Dr. Peters learn the ropes and spent many hours in this role behind the scenes. Given her caution about being seen and heard, she let Dr. Peters be the more visible administrator in their department. Coaching sessions for Dr. Sanders focused on how to establish her autonomy; how to successfully assert her authority and how to set a boundary with a separate identity from her new associate director, Dr. Peters; and how to address conflict directly.

**Case 2.** Professor Jones was an excellent teacher who handled all tasks with great efficiency and responsibility. Extremely introverted, she liked to work with her door closed, with minimal social exchange and treasured quiet time alone at her desk. She spent long days at work and looked forward to renewing herself at home after hours. Although she was liked by others and always socially appropriate, she maintained a strong and at times an impenetrable personal boundary. Professor Jones was

surprised to learn that her new role involved not just task accomplishment but informal attention to relationships, involving verbal and visible accessibility which she had formerly considered a waste of time. Learning to “schmooze, making daily contact and stopping by other peoples' offices” were component parts of leadership she had not previously considered. Being more accessible and balancing that with her need to work quietly on her own was one challenge of focus in the coaching process. Professor Jones and the coach talked about what it was like to stop by other director's offices and how she could answer e-mails such that they were both to the point but also made some personal references that would build connection between herself, her faculty reports, and other directors. They identified hours of the day when she could most comfortably have an “open-door” policy and other times when it would be appropriate to partially close her door.

**Case 3.** Dr. Fisher, one of the directors promoted from the faculty ranks, identified several challenges that she wanted help on. She felt reluctant to network with other chairs of departments within the university. She felt lonely in her office, now isolated from her former faculty colleagues. She found it hard to withhold what was now privileged information from them and was reluctant to make decisions about work schedules that her former peers would not like. Coaching helped Dr. Fisher become more comfortable in her new position of authority by sharing ways of communicating with her new reports that conveyed both respect and authority. Role playing some of these situations proved helpful for Dr. Fisher, and consequently, her concern about disappointing former colleagues slowly disappeared. Coaching helped her to develop her own style of networking with other directors, and her loneliness diminished as she found new support within the Executive Nurse Council.

**Case 4.** Dr. Peltz had work experiences at a different institution that resulted in distrust of “supervisors,” and she was therefore reluctant to share her administrative challenges. This posed enormous potential conflict because she ran a department that had many faculty and administrative problems. To compound the difficulties for this new administrative director, her department was being placed into a new reporting structure under the associate dean, a chance that did not please her. It was therefore imperative that she and the associate dean, her new supervisor, communicate and attempt to solve problems together. Coaching focused on helping Dr. Peltz move past her former experience of fear and hurt and encouraged her to be open to a new experience of supervision that was supportive and helpful. One of the outcomes of this coaching process was Dr. Peltz's commitment to meeting with the associate dean every other week to review the difficult administrative issues she had inherited. During the coaching sessions and meetings with the associate dean, she came to value the guidance and support she got and learned that no recrimination would follow from differing opinions.

All of the new administrators who received coaching found it beneficial. One said, "An objective third party is able to provide feedback without politics influencing the advice. An executive coach is invaluable." Another said, "It was a life-transforming experience for me to learn how to stretch myself and still feel comfortable." One of the administrators had great apprehension about being coached. Her reluctance was rooted in her sense of vulnerability and mild skepticism about whether "professional coaching" could be effective. By the end of the coaching sequence, she felt that the coach's professional guidance came at just the right time in her career. She stated, "The coach encouraged me to reflect on my leadership style and to celebrate and relish my successes before obsessively moving on to the next goal."

The new directors were delighted with the results of their investment in coaching. In collaboration with the coach, the directors debriefed the coaching process and learned what, in some cases, would make for even better results in the future. The purpose for coaching was developmental with highly competent professionals with high leadership potential. Given that directors were new in their respective administrative positions, it was determined that 360-degree feedback surveys were not needed for establishing coaching themes. The associate dean had the confidence that the new academic nurse administrators would use their time with the coach productively to gain insight about their behavior and make progress on their challenges without setting up specific criteria for goal accomplishment. She trusted that results would be observed and reported by the coachee and other directors who worked together with the directors in the Executive Nurse Council. This was, in fact, the case. Clearly, in the future, the associate dean will assess very carefully whether or not the coachee's challenges are such that more detailed feedback, or more style profiles, are necessary and if more formal goal setting with benchmarks and final assessments are in order.

### Conclusion

Given the pending shortage of seasoned nursing academic administrators, leadership development programs and executive coaching opportunities are vital to better prepare our next-generation leaders. Such an investment

in precious nursing faculty human capital saves time and energy in the long run because fiscal and human resource management improves over time as nursing unit managers achieve their developmental goals.

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