

Leadership

IN SCHOOL NURSING

Whether you are new to school nursing or have been practicing for years, you must be aware that the title of school nurse puts you in a position of leadership. You lead students, faculty and staff in your school; you lead the community in which you live and work. You guide people toward health. They request information when faced with a health crisis. You take control in emergencies. School nurses are at the forefront of developing school health policies and procedures. Do you have the qualities of a leader? “The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader” (Maxwell, 1999) expounds the characteristics of a good leader. This book helps the school nurse in the quest toward leadership. The following is a discussion of the main points of this book and their application to school nursing.

Leadership Characteristics

The first leadership quality is character. *Character is more than talk, it is action, it is a choice and it can bring lasting success with people.* If you want your students to make healthy choices you encourage them by making those healthy choices in your own life. Parents and students look to the school nurse to be a role model for such things as alcohol and drug avoidance, and traits such as maintaining confidentiality and maintaining respect in personal interactions.

Charisma is a quality that attracts others to you. Some of Maxwell’s advice is to love life, value others, instill hope and share yourself. The school nurse needs followers, whether they are students or parents. As the only healthcare provider in a school building, you need people to believe in you and your skills.

“Commitment separates doers from dreamers.” Are you committed to your students? Do you advocate for their needs? Test commitment by action. When you see an injustice, speak out — don’t just follow along. The school nurse completes daily tasks with the same vigor at the beginning and the end of the year.

Communication, being able to articulate what you do and why, can be the most frustrating area for a school nurse. Working in an educator’s world, you speak up for yourself and your medically-fragile students. Maxwell has several recommendations in this area. He recommends *simplifying your message, seeing the person you are communicating with, showing the truth and seeking a response. He clarifies that credibility comes from believing and living what you say.* Allow time for questions and answers.

Competence — Basic nursing care is at the heart of school nursing. The school nurse continues to read nursing literature and attend quality continuing education classes. If your district does not have funding, perhaps you could find an alternative source of funding, attend during the summer months or engage in online learning. Quality nursing care must be delivered.

“Courage is making things right, not just smoothing them over.” Hone your people skills. Use your commitment skills to deal with difficult situations. When something goes wrong, address it and talk it out. Stand up for your beliefs.

Described as the ability to find the root of the matter, discernment requires rational thought and intuition. Look to the root of the “tummy ache.” Is it class avoidance, a difficult situation at home, girlfriend or boyfriend trouble, school phobia — or appendicitis?

Focus involves looking at your areas of strength and putting effort into them. Is diabetes care your strength? Perhaps you could share your expertise in diabetes in a health class or community forum. Whatever your strengths are, cultivate them. Identify and attempt to strengthen areas of weakness.

Generosity is another important leadership quality. Do you participate in student fund raising efforts or school spirit days? Do you volunteer in after school or community activities? Students and parents take notice of these efforts.

Initiative involves looking for opportunities and taking them. Be ready for the right moment to introduce your new idea. Then take the next step and follow through. Your ideas may not be a priority when budgets are declining and high stakes testing is taking precedence. Perhaps an alternate funding source or grant may be the catalyst needed.

Listening is essential to the school nurse role. Listen to a person and pay attention to the emotional aspect of what they are saying. In other words, “read between the lines.” When a student says he/she is ill, often he/she is really saying he/she is worried about a presentation, someone is bullying him/her or he/she is concerned about a family issue. You gain a positive connection with the student and community by listening.

Maxwell notes that leaders must *possess passion for their jobs.* It is easy to become emotionally drained by the many challenges that students present today. School nurses must deal

with the many social issues that our society faces and care for those students lacking routine preventive health care. Love what you do, be enthusiastic, and work hard to make a difference in a student's life.

A *positive attitude* is another important leadership quality. An upbeat attitude sets the stage for positive interactions. In stressful situations, a positive attitude helps preserve a calm environment. Maintain an optimistic, encouraging demeanor to convey to students that you are accessible to help with their problems.

An effective leader develops problem-solving skills. A school nurse often works isolated from other healthcare workers. The nurse works independently yet collaborates with parents, teachers, administrators and community agencies to assist students with both acute and chronic issues. The school nurse anticipates problems by formulating care plans and following policies and procedures. The school day consists of constant decision making as students are triaged and problems handled. What school nurse has not had to be creative in dealing with such problems as broken eyeglasses or gum in the hair, while treating a student with low blood glucose or a student with an asthma attack and no inhaler?

The *ability to build relationships* is an integral leadership skill. Get to know each student as a unique individual. Realize that people come from different backgrounds and become familiar with them and their families to find out about their health care needs. Use respect and good "people skills" to interact with staff, administrators, and community members. Network with individuals on school committees to foster positive interactions.

Responsibility plays an important role in leadership. *Leaders are accountable for the decisions they make.* School nurses are accountable for completing mandated screenings while also taking care of many unscheduled problems. Regardless of the emergency that may interrupt our schedules, we work hard and get the job done. Many nurses, out of a sense of responsibility, stay late, or miss lunch to take care of a sick child or answer the health question of a colleague.

Having a sense of security enables a person to empower others. *A secure leader displays confidence.* A school nurse assists students to become independent and make healthy decisions. Collaborate with school staff to foster academic achievement. Act as mentors for those entering into the school nurse role and appreciate your part in their success.

Self-discipline occurs when a person determines what is important and follows through to achieve the goal. Nurses must strive to keep current with changing nursing practices through continuing education. School nurses set an example by promoting self-discipline in personal wellness and by educating students about restraint.

Servanthood, putting other's needs ahead of your own, is an important attribute of successful nurse leaders. School nurses often volunteer time on wellness committees, student assistance programs, and various fund-raising events to champion the causes of needy students and community members. We take care of others not because it is expected of us, but because of the genuine caring that we feel for others.

Maxwell contends that *teachability, the ability to keep learning, is also an important leadership quality.* School nurses, no matter how many years of experience they may have, often face challenges of taking care of students with unfamiliar diagnoses, new medications, or novel procedures. Often people ask questions

about disease processes that require research before responding. Keep learning, learn from mistakes, and be open and ready for new challenges.

Finally, it is crucial that leaders be aware of and evaluate their vision. According to Maxwell, *vision is the voice within that directs you to what you aspire to be.* Reflect on your experiences and learn from them. Associate with those who have a similar vision and work together to accomplish goals. Provide the best quality nursing care. Your vision is how staff, students and the community recognize you.

Summary

The role of the school nurse is to assure the health needs of students so they can achieve their academic potential. The responsibilities of the school nurse continue to increase. School nurses are responsible for an ever-increasing array of health and social needs and complicated medical procedures. The development of leadership qualities is essential in order to advocate for children, promote wellness, and manage acute and chronic health problems. "The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader" details leadership qualities that a school nurse will find essential in order to lead our school communities in making healthy decisions. 🏆

REFERENCE

Maxwell, J. C. (1999). *The 21 indispensable qualities of a leader.* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

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