



Courage and Caring

Step Up to Your Next Level of Nursing Excellence

By Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert

Ask people to identify a “caring profession,” and nursing most often comes to mind. But ask those same people to identify a “courageous profession,” and they’ll spout such professions as police work, firefighting, entrepreneur, or racecar driving. Nursing is typically overlooked and ranks near the bottom of the list. This is unfortunate, because in reality, nursing is the embodiment of both care and courage. Nurses who “own” their courage recognize that there is a direct correlation between their success quotient and their courage quotient.

Why is courage so often unnoticed in the nursing profession? Most people do not regard courage as one of the primary virtues necessary for healthcare success. They mistakenly believe that courage is only relevant during particularly perilous times. As a result, they don’t perceive comforting a sick or dying person, questioning a doctor’s recommendation, attempting a new medical procedure, or taking initiative as courageous workplace moments.

Nurses who work in a hospital environment have their courage tested daily. They often find themselves trapped between two distinct cultures and mindsets. As they maneuver through the bottom-line, business-oriented corporate hierarchy of the hospital, they often find themselves tackling common challenges, such as office gossip, cutthroat promotion opportunities, and overburdened workloads. At the same time, they must tactfully balance these bureaucratic business issues with the nurturing nature of their chosen profession. Many times the hospital’s corporate culture directly contradicts the caring nursing profession, causing many nurses to feel frustrated and emotionally drained. Hence, they become dispirited; the opposite of courage.

Opportunities for nurses to display courage occur nearly every day. From speaking up during a staff meeting to overcoming an obstacle that hinders professional advancement, these instances are often the defining moments of a nurse’s career. As nurses allow their courage to show at work, these events compound to yield greater professional status and improved personal fulfillment.

The Heart and Spirit of Courage

The original definition of the word “courage” comes from the French word *corage*, meaning “heart and spirit.” Historically, nurturing and compassionate people have always acted from their hearts, but notions of courage as heroic have diminished this heartfelt value of courage. Without courage, however, a key part of our spirit is lost. Perhaps that’s why Aristotle believed that courage is the first of human virtues because it makes all the other virtues possible.

When you come from your heart and spirit and allow your passion for what you do to guide you, you are displaying your true essence. Many people prefer to settle for conformity or complacency (two out of nine courage killers) rather than display courage at work. They believe that standing up for what's right or advancing professionally is not worth the sacrifice or time to accomplish it. They don't want to open themselves up to criticism, attend evening school to obtain a degree or certification, or commit to their calling. Such people are not acting courageously.

People with courage state their objectives and then go backwards from there to look for what's possible. Using discernment, they develop new models when the door to an old model closes. These people move forward and upward, never quit, and take risks to reinvent them. Setting challenging goals and taking calculated risks reveal their heart and spirit. Because of their desire to continually learn and improve their performance, they build an innate reservoir of courage that leads them down the path to success.

Step Up with Courage

Building your courage reservoir is similar to climbing a standard six-foot ladder. The first step is low and wide, with each consecutive step getting higher and narrower. Near the top of the ladder the ascent can get a little shaky as the steps taper. For a nurse, a new hospital policy that requires you to devote more time to paperwork and less time with patients may perpetuate feelings of frustration and anxiety. But conquering an obstacle or revealing vulnerability are behaviors of courage. They support you to face the challenge head on. What would happen if you said, "Even though my supervisor disagreed, it took a lot of courage for me to challenge the new policy and open myself to criticism and conflict?"

People who continually "step up" do not easily give up on their opinions and judgments, even when challenged. Their willingness to be ostracized after a meeting for expressing an idea requires self-efficacy—the capacity for producing a desired result or effect. This behavior is very different from being close-minded and narrow. In other words, nurses with courage believe in themselves and their skills. Even more important, they do not blame others for their shortcomings or failures. They hold themselves 100% accountable and recognize the value of courageous will. They have control over the patterns that govern their beliefs and know their zone of courageous energy.

As you continue to climb each step of the ladder, your motivation to improve standards of care, to commit to the hospital's mission, and to seize opportunities that allow you to take setbacks and obstacles in stride intensifies. Unfortunately, 20% of people never make it past the first rung. They don't identify their goals and quit before they start. The other 80% of people set goals for their personal and professional endeavors. As the challenges increase, the group takes a break to regroup and refuel. Sixty-five percent of the people decide they are content to stay where they are, so they settle in. Only the remaining 15% reset their goals, commit to their original vision and purpose, and continue the climb. When they reach a difficult moment, they ask themselves, "Do I really want this?" Then, after reevaluating their

path, they decide whether the sacrifice is worth the goal. If they need to make adjustments to their plan, they do. They constantly refocus and continue their climb out of conscious choice. For such courageous caregivers, settling is not an option. They reach the top rung of the ladder.

What rung of the ladder will satisfy you?

5 Tips for Applying Courage in a Healthcare Setting

Courageous nurses recognize defining moments and display courage every day. This conscious action is vital to their success, particularly during times of uncertainty. Based on five years of original research, twelve behaviors of courage emerged that cultivate a reservoir of courage. Below you will find five behaviors the courageous nurse can utilize to keep stepping up. When you develop the following behaviors in yourself, you'll be better able to call upon your courage when needed.

1. Constantly affirm your strength and determination

Many underlying principles guide the "nursing spirit." As you go through your day, realize that no one expects you to be perfect. Take time for daily reflection (at least twenty minutes of silence). This way you can evaluate and best apply your resources. When you know how your strengths can benefit the medical facility and your patients, you'll be able to do what you believe is right and accept any challenge as an opportunity for professional growth.

2. Hurdle obstacles and take risks

Every behavior you exhibit and every action you take is a conscious choice. Give yourself permission to choose to be different so you can creatively navigate your way around, through, or over any obstacles that cross your path. When you feel reluctance set in, ask yourself, "What's the worst thing that can happen if I do this?" Usually the worst never occurs, so take the risk and step up the ladder.

3. Manifest vision

There are no shortcuts when it comes to displaying courage. Know where you want to go and develop a crystal clear vision of your goal. Become stubborn about attaining your vision so you can discard any non-productive judgments others put on you.

4. Reflect self-esteem

All your actions reflect who you are and what you stand for. If you're repeating a certain behavior that you don't like, don't editorialize. Look inside and ask, "What do I need to change?" Sharpen your skills and abilities through education, reading, and training, and surround yourself with the kind of people you want to become. Stay disciplined and focused on the results.

5. Speak up

If you feel uncomfortable in a situation, believe your intuition and tell those involved why you believe the situation is not right. Exercise your courageous voice by challenging the status quo and making waves when someone is putting you down or when water-cooler gossip is getting out of hand.

Claim Your Courage Today

If courage has eluded you in the past, now is the time to step up and make your daily activities a profile in courage—the one that reveals *your* heart and spirit. Confront issues even when no one backs you. Stand up for patient rights. Be vulnerable to admit a mistake. Take the initiative to update your skills. Allow your caring nature to show. And most important, manifest a vision and follow it. When you follow a decisive course of action and do what’s best for you and your patients, you become a catalyst for profound change and an initiator who can lead others to the same path. With such courageous mindset, your future success is imminent.

Sidebar:

If you want to increase your courage quotient, practice the following exercise. You’ll soon be able to “step up” and tap into your courage reservoir.

1. Recall a specific moment in your work life when you were proud of yourself. Maybe you finally confronted the supervisor who always berated you in front of others. Perhaps you committed to learning a new procedure that benefited your career. Whatever the event, relive that experience and determine the specific behavior you employed that made the difference. This was your courage at work!
2. Think of a recent time when courage and its energy (virtue in Latin means “energy”) were not called upon—when the portal to your heart was asleep. This was a missed opportunity that can never be reclaimed. You don’t want this to happen again. What possible outcomes may have been different if you had drawn from your existing reservoir of courage?
3. State your intent to claim your courage this year. Write it down and post it prominently!
4. As your footprints of courage are being formed throughout the year, notice how your actions reveal your authenticity. Then keep asking, “Am I applying the behaviors of courage?”

About the Author:

Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert, founder of STUCKThinking™, is a learning consultant, speaker, corporate trainer and courage coach. Specializing in understanding courage behaviors, individual personalities and leadership styles that focus on the human condition, the author/trainer facilitates individuals and groups in discovering their hidden talents. She is the internationally published author of *Courage: The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman/Reclaiming the Forgotten Virtue*. Her second book is currently agent represented. She is

qualified to administer and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® and is a certified Enneagram teacher. She is a candidate for an Honorary Doctorate Degree.

Sandra provides skill-based programs for public and private businesses, including Caterpillar, Inc., Auburn University, Procter & Gamble, Wyoming Department of Health Public Nurses, Farmers Insurance, Wide Open West and Hitachi Consulting. She taught Continuing Professional Education courses for more than eleven years at the Colorado Society of CPAs and University of Denver and she will return in 2009 at DU to teach four programs. To learn more about how Sandra can help your business cultivate courage or to purchase a copy of her first book, visit www.walstoncourage.com or email her at swalston@walstoncourage.com.

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