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ENGAGE AND TRANSFORM

What would the environment where you practice nursing look like if you designed it yourself—exactly to your own specifications? Have you ever dared to dream about it?

If you're anything like me and most Americans, you dream at least once in awhile about what you would do if you won the lottery. If all your financial limitations and burdens were lifted and you could pursue anything you had a passion to do, what would you do? This is a pretty common exercise for us humans.

I don't want to spoil the euphoria of this daydream, but chances are that few, if any of us will win the big jackpot. However, the odds are high that most of us will go back to our work as nurses once we leave NTI. We will continue to spend a significant part of our lives in our workplace, caring for patients whose lives depend on us. How often do we dream about what our workplace would look like if we had the power to change it?

I assert to you this morning that we do have the power to change our workplaces so that they meet our needs as healthcare team members and individuals who care for the most vulnerable patients.

Before you think that the powerful elixir of NTI inspiration and rejuvenation has gone to my head, please hear me out. Suspend your skepticism, even if just for the next few minutes.

Over the last year, a group of nurses—much like you or me—dared to imagine what our workplaces would look like if they were built to the specifications of our dreams. That group then wrote down those specifications, in what have become the AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments.



This ideal environment is characterized by six essential elements that lead to excellence.

SKILLED COMMUNICATION

What if nurses and their colleagues were as proficient in communication skills as they are in their clinical skills?

TRUE COLLABORATION

What if nurses were relentless in pursuing and fostering the kind of collaboration that is needed, to efficiently and effectively care for patients?

EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

What if nurses were valued and committed partners in making policy, directing and evaluating clinical care, and leading organizational operations?

APPROPRIATE STAFFING

What if there were always an effective match between patients' needs and nurses' competencies?

MEANINGFUL RECOGNITION

What if nurses were recognized and recognized others for the value each brings to the work of the organization?

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

What if nurse leaders fully embraced the imperative of a healthy work environment, authentically lived it and engaged others in its achievement?

When you think of these six characteristics, don't they describe the things that are most important to us as we strive to provide our patients with the excellent care we would want for ourselves and our loved ones?

Are we there yet? What will it take us to get there?

It will take each one of us to make this dream a reality—to transform our work environments into what they need to be, so that nurses and patients alike will thrive and realize their full potential.

What is it that will be required specifically for you and me to create the changes that we wish to see? What will drive us and keep us on track when the going gets tough after we leave the cocoon of NTI and return to the real world and the reality of life back home?

Nurses are, by far, the largest group of individuals in the hospital environment. How is it possible then that we are not complicit in what is wrong with our environments?

Isn't it possible then, that working together toward a common goal, we could succeed in transforming where we work? What will it take?

It will take our sustained engagement in identifying what needs to be transformed and in driving the transformation itself.

Yes, forces in healthcare are daunting. Sometimes they seem impossible to overcome.

Hospitals don't have enough nurses. They rarely have enough money. And they are increasingly filled with sicker and sicker patients who require care that is more intricate and intensive.

It sometimes feels like a miracle that we are able to do what we do for patients despite all these challenges. If we're not satisfied with the status quo, we must not convince ourselves that we are powerless.

Correspondingly, we must admit that we are not exempt or excused from being a part of all that it will take to change our environments. If we are not engaged, how can we expect the transformation to be achieved?

If we are not engaged, all we can hope for is more of the same.

Don't we often fall into the age old trap of believing that it's someone else's job to transform our environment? We all know that there's no magic someone. The magic lies within each of us.

The great leader Gandhi said, "We must be the change we wish to see."

This eternal truth is what inspired me to select my theme, Engage and Transform.

Whether you call what we need to do Living our Contribution, Rising Above or using our Bold Voices...it is all about action...our behavior, our communication, our role in creating solutions, our unwillingness to stop growing and learning. If you're a diehard NTI fan, you've sat in this audience over the last few years as new AACN presidents unveiled their

themes. You might be thinking that Engage and Transform sounds familiar. I hope so.

While the view that I have is distinct from prior themes, the underlying call to action for us as nurses is the same. When the message is right, it cannot waver. We can't switch gears until the change we wish to see is realized.

Think of how many years it took for women to get the vote, for civil rights to become legislated, for democracy to be achieved. There are many dimensions of the subject on which AACN has been speaking these many years. With each passing year we learn more together as we explore these themes. The kind of dramatic cultural transformation that we must see in our work environments requires the engagement of each of us as individuals.

So, exactly what do I mean by “engagement”? I mean commitment, tenacity and the dogged determination that I know nurses can have when they are driven by a vision that calls to them from the inside out. Like the way you are engaged each time you fight for a patient's right to die without pain, surrounded by the people he loves. Like the drive nurses have when they see systems that don't support excellent patient care—that unwillingness to relent until things are “set right” in the name of patients and their safety.

The kind of being engaged I'm calling for brings us to a whole new level of commitment—of being willing to be accountable, for the environments in which we practice and the outcomes we produce.

When you and I and our colleagues are engaged at this level, we will have the ability to transform our work, our environments in which we practice and the results we achieve.

What does a “transformed” environment look like? It is an environment where nurses are truly as skilled at communicating as they are in their clinical skills.

It is a workplace where true collaboration is not optional, and where those who choose not to collaborate are neither tolerated nor welcome in the care of patients.

It is elevating our priorities so that clinical outcomes, like ventilator associated pneumonia become an exception. A landmark event. Where we investigate every detail of what went wrong because we run a ship so tight that such a complication in our hands is unheard of.

It is a hospital where errors are discussed openly and colleagues are supported when they occur, because we know that patients are not the only ones who suffer when mistakes take place. Healthcare providers do too.

It is a workplace that calls to us again and rekindles the passion we still have deep inside for this important work that most of us still love to do.

The acts of engaging and transforming cannot be achieved in isolation. Being engaged is about involving ourselves, about participating, about investing in what we value. It is about acting on what we know should not continue because it is not right. Unless we engage, transformation will happen, but it will happen to us, not because of us.

Consider this quote by anthropologist Margaret Mead.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

There is no doubt that our engagement is the key to the kind of transformation we know must occur. I'd like to suggest that to be effective in transforming our environments, we must also engage in transforming ourselves as individuals.

Heidi Wills, a former Councilwoman in Seattle suggests, that “For things to change, we must change. For things to get better, we must get better.”

To sustain ourselves, we must concentrate on our strengths, what we uniquely bring to critical care patients and their families. We must spend time doing work that energizes us rather than drains us. This means actively engaging in repairing systems rather than perpetuating workarounds. It means being a willing and productive participant—not a disgruntled spectator—in making it possible for nurses like us to concentrate our focus on actual care delivery.

Transformation starts with self. It takes courage and self assessment to put ourselves out there. Until we convince ourselves of what we have to offer, how can we show others the vast potential of our contribution? We need to be willing to honestly appraise ourselves to get beyond our entrenched personal and professional mental models. Are our communication skills on par with our clinical skills?

What would it take to get there?

Can we have an “Oprah” moment together? Think back to a time when you were 100% engaged in what you were doing. Where all that you bring to bear with your expertise came together. Where your true passion was evident and realized. Maybe a time when your nursing expertise uncovered the subtle signs of emerging sepsis in a patient whose life you saved.

Remember how this made you feel? How your engagement impacted others and what positive changes occurred as a result? Use this as a guide as you look ahead to how you can engage in the transformation that needs to occur in your workplace. Don't overwhelm yourself in the beginning of this journey of self transformation. Start by thinking about what one engagement made by you will make the greatest transformation in your unit. Think about the possibilities for positive change. What will it take to sustain your engagement in this transformation?

On the flip side, think about what your unit would look like in two years, if you and every one of your colleagues mentally retreated from the hard work of transforming it. If you resigned yourselves to letting people other than nurses determine the destiny of patient care. I'm afraid that this picture will look nothing like that dream environment that you have in your mind. Inaction is a very deliberate action.

For me, and for AACN, it is risky and unethical not to engage.

We must remind ourselves that, as nurses, we are major influencers of the culture where we work. Whether and how we each choose to engage contributes to the tone of our environment. By acknowledging that “I am a part of this culture,” I cannot fall back and assume the victim role.

“It is not only for what we do that we are held responsible, but also for what we do not do.”

These words by the French playwright Moliere compel us to set a higher bar for our engagement in transforming our environments—the safety of our patients depends on this engagement.

As nurses, our individual spirits and our collective code of ethics compel us to be engaged. Few occupations can afford people who are not engaged. But healthcare is downright dangerous when we are not.

Transforming ourselves is a lifelong engagement. Changing our environments will also be a long term commitment. This ancient Chinese proverb advises,

“Be not afraid of going slowly, be only afraid of standing still.”

Transformation takes time—it is most often achieved step by patient and deliberate step.

Incremental transformation comes from even the seemingly smallest engagements. Whether it's smuggling a beloved pet up the back stairs so that a patient can benefit from its presence or allowing a lifelong spouse to be with their loved one continuously until time of death, these acts accumulate, and eventually transform how we think of good patient care.

Imagine back to the time when a father was not permitted—let alone expected to be in the delivery room to experience the birth of his child.

There is a rhythm or progression to transformation. Some brave soul engages. Takes a risk to change the status quo. Isolated good outcomes are observed and word spreads. These outcomes get documented as evidence-based practice. And then the right thing becomes second nature.

Our attendance here at NTI is a critical form of engagement. By committing our time and financial resources to coming here to learn, we are able to go back to our workplaces and be agents of transformation. What we learn here often makes a huge difference in the outcomes of our patients. Consider this example:

After the 2002 NTI in Atlanta, one of our attendees Julie Lau wrote to tell us that she knew she had learned a great deal at the NTI. However, she said, “I did not expect that I would be applying the knowledge I gained so soon after returning home.” “Shortly after the NTI, I was able to share what I had learned at a Sunrise Session on heparin-induced thrombocytopenia to convince physicians on my unit to discontinue heparin for a patient who I knew was struggling. Upon discontinuing the heparin, our patient's platelet count went from 74 to 104. What I learned at NTI helped me to make a difference in one life. And this is just the beginning.”

Each of us has many compelling stories of how our engagement transformed the individuals we care for, the system in which we work, and ourselves. This engagement renewed our spirits and our faith so that we could make a difference despite the obstacles.

I know another nurse who was caring for a small child whose death was imminent. The boy and his family were of Native

American origin and held tightly to their beliefs and rituals around death. They believed that a person's spirit cannot be freed unless he is facing the sky at the time of death. For the spirit of their child to be free, there could not be a roof above him when he died.

Although it took a great deal of time, some bending of rules and careful, swift coordination, the nurse arranged to bring the child and his family up to the roof of the hospital. And under the night sky, the parents held their child in their arms while he died. His spirit was released to the heavens.

The parents, in all their grief, found peace in the death of their son, and began the healing process in a healthy way, free of guilt that they hadn't been able to do for their child what was right. And, in all their grief, they found it in themselves to thank the nurse who made this good death possible.

That nurse is me. And I am forever transformed by that experience.

We transform and get transformed all the time if we're engaged. The trick is to see this, and recognize when we are doing things that feed our soul, and improve the environment for ourselves and those around us.

Our individual engagement grows into collective engagement. This is where transformation gains momentum.

Our collective engagement through professional organizations like AACN, can be transformational on a grand scale. Think about the strides we've made in mobilizing to bring attention to the dangers of the nursing shortage and inadequate nurse staffing. About how much we've transformed visiting and family presence policies in hospitals. And about how optimal end of life care is defined by a patient's wishes. These strides are energizing. Of course, there are still miles to go. But we must mark our successes and applaud the transformations we've made.

If each one of us in this room today commits courageously to engage in transforming ourselves, our practice and our workplace, imagine what the hospital environment could look like from a patient's perspective. Imagine the increased respect we and our colleagues will enjoy. Imagine how many more patients will have their wishes honored as their lives come to an end. Imagine how close we could get to that dream environment that we painted in our minds a few minutes ago.

Transformation begins with you, exactly as you are right now.

By transforming yourself, you create powerful new opportunities for yourself, your relationships and your workplace.

Where is your part in creating a healthy work environment? Can you be honest with yourself on where you are now, so that you can engage in transforming yourself and your culture?

Eric Klein is a visionary healthcare consultant. He tells a story that I find highly motivating. It goes like this:

A student noticed that her teacher wore an unusual necklace around her neck. From a silver chain hung two turquoise figures. "What are those?" asked the student, "They look like animals."

"These are dogs," the teacher smiled and continued. "One is the dog of light that embodies my purpose and passion. The other is the dog of darkness that embodies my fear and limitation. Wearing them reminds me that these two dogs within me are always fighting."

The student asked, "Which one will win the fight?"

The teacher looked into the student's eyes and said, "Whichever one I feed."

Deciding which dog to feed is a critical step for many of us. The dog we feed not only transforms us—for better or worse—it transforms others around us and, ultimately, our environment is transformed.

My wish for us over the year ahead, is that each one of us commits to engaging ourselves in the transformation of our workplace cultures.

That we live powerfully.

That we take responsibility for our experience and generate greatness in our lives.

I invite you to take a moment with me to begin your journey of self-transformation by considering these questions:

- What would you attempt if you knew you could not fail?
- Who are "they" that hold so much power over our lives?

- If your workplace was exactly as you wanted it, what would it be like?
- How will you go back and make your nurse colleagues feel like you do today, after a week at NTI?

What is your unrelenting passion?

If not now, when?

If each of us engages in growing into the answers to these questions and transforming our work environments into healthy places, I have no doubt that we can see our dream become reality.

Thank you for engaging yourselves at NTI this week. I look forward to growing and transforming with each of you over the year ahead and to celebrating our new accomplishments at next year's NTI.

Thank you.

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