Achieving Uncommon Results Through Caring Leadership

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Caring leadership promotes meaningful connections at all levels and deepens trust with all members of the leadership team. Interviews with 3 high-achieving executives led to the discovery of 5 specific behaviors—self-awareness, deep listening, being curious, demonstrating empathy, and decisiveness—used by all 3 leaders. These behaviors, used consistently, create the conditions for sustainable personal and organizational success and lead to achieving uncommon results.

In these days of quick action, complex and resource intensive initiatives, narrowing margins, and greater competition within markets, our leadership focus requires us to be effective and achieve our goals to survive. As executives within our respective organizations, we know what we need to do to be successful, and we take action to ensure our viability. We are strategic, outcomes-oriented, and highly skilled in operations. We are articulate, succinct, and are able to communicate efficiently to get the job done. The questions rarely asked are: Do we bring our hearts to the workplace each and every day, at every meeting, and during all interactions and conversations? Do we engage our hearts with our teams, leaders, staff, medical staff, and colleagues? Finally, do we value caring as a leadership imperative?

Caring leadership is a way of serving all leaders of the organization who then serve caregivers and members of the medical center/organization who are meeting the needs of patients, families, and the community. Being values-driven is foundational to caring leadership. Understanding one’s self, acting in accordance with one’s personal values, and knowing how others perceive us are attributes of caring leadership.1

In preparation for this article, the authors interviewed 3 exemplary leaders who demonstrate caring leadership. Our goal was to identify key behaviors that guide these leaders to achieve uncommon results and that would serve as a call to action for others. The following 5 specific behaviors—self-awareness, deep listening, curiosity, decisiveness, and empathy—were gleaned from the interviews.

For example, one chief nursing officer (CNO) demonstrated caring leadership by shifting his professional practice from caring for patients to growing nurse leaders and giving them the tools and resources needed to lead and be successful. A second leader was able to focus on the style and needs of others, and adjust his own style to create a caring connection. By finding common ground and connecting, better decisions and longer-term solutions were the outcome. In this leader’s case, if someone was data-driven, he provided data, and if someone was results focused, he showed them how to get to results in a way that met their needs. In each case, personal values drove each leader’s behavior and created the energy for change.

For one CNO, caring leadership led to achieving a fifth Magnet® designation in the midst of a system-wide merger and zero patient diversions in the emergency department. These results were possible because all levels of staff and leaders believed in these goals, and the CNO led these initiatives using her caring leadership skills. A second CNO’s caring leadership led to the 99th percentile for employee engagement and being recognized as a Fortune 500 Best Place to Work. The third leader guided two organizations through a successful merger and continues to excel in the newly formed organization. All 3 achieved uncommon results through caring, connecting and leading with empathy.

Caring leadership is exemplified by the following 5 specific behaviors, and when integrated into practice, leads to uncommon results.

KEY POINTS

- Caring leadership can be learned and, when used consistently, becomes an effective behavior.
- Integrating self-awareness, deep listening, being curious, being empathetic, and being decisive all contribute to a leader’s ability to achieve uncommon organizational results.
- Caring leaders achieve results in different types of organizations and roles.

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THE 5 BEHAVIORS OF CARING LEADERSHIP

Self-Awareness
Caring leaders communicate caring and achieve uncommon organizational outcomes by being self-aware in each and every interaction. One CNO remarked that understanding herself and how others perceived her was essential to her leadership. Knowing her values and beliefs, and how they could be challenged prepared her for managing potential conflict. Noticing the first signs of an emotion sparked during a discussion allowed her to pause, take notice, and decide how best to move the dialog forward, always with the goal of maintaining respect for the other. For example, she was actively involved in system integration activities, and a new model of clinical education was being introduced. Unit-based nursing education and orientation would be provided by a nurse educator, necessitating a shift from the clinical manager and clinical nurse specialist (CNS) dyad approach that had been in place for 30 years. With the new model and shift to educators, the CNSs' belief that the role of CNS was no longer valued. Several were angry and upset. The CNO paused, collaborated with their director, and recognized that it was important for her to meet with the CNSs face-to-face, put herself in their shoes, and let them know that they were valued. She explained that she was securing several CNS positions for specific complex patient populations; therefore, current CNSs would have options. For this CNO, listening and demonstrating empathy led to CNSs' restored trust in her, feeling valued, and even being excited by a new future that was still unfolding.

The rapid pace of change and the need for difficult decisions required the CNO to listen intently, to observe others and their perceptions of her in meetings, and to step back and take notice of conversations that were not moving toward resolution and collaboration. Maintaining self-awareness during turbulent conversations that are not leading to positive results and shifting from a focus on facts and process to listening for the meaning behind emotions and reactions of others leads to connection, engagement and mutual understanding.

Authenticity for all 3 leaders is the cornerstone for self-awareness. Being transparent, willing to be vulnerable, forthright, and admit failures were required, as well as a hands-on persistence to rectify a situation that has gone awry, was key. Authenticity and vulnerability lead to trust—a critical outcome of caring leadership. One CNO provided the following example of the significance of authenticity. "I admit my failures and let others know for example, that a new complex IT system that I advocated for did not meet our expectations. It was my job to own it and work toward improving the system so that it meets our needs. It was a significant undertaking, and we were confident that we would be successful in the implementation of this complex system. Unfortunately, our 'go live' did not go as planned. We immediately scheduled weekly improvement committee meetings to address the problems we were experiencing. One year later, we continue to meet, and I attend, participate, and ensure that issues are addressed to the satisfaction of the leaders. I made this commitment to my team because my role as CNO is to lead us to a good solution. Leaders and staff know that they can count on me even in these overwhelming, complex, and seemingly unsolvable situations."

Deep Listening
Listening with the intent to understand another’s perspective is paramount to caring leadership. All 3 executives shared a common practice of limiting all forms of distraction. “Once someone steps into my office, the closing of my door is a reminder to me to be present and attend only to the person in front of me. I maintain eye contact and connect what he/she is communicating to me to the larger picture. I want leaders and staff to know that what they have to say to me matters to me.” For example, one CNO was contacted by an intensive care unit manager. The manager conveyed that several clinical nurses who were experts in the care of critically ill surgical cardiac patients had been offered substantial salary increases and sign-on bonuses for accepting positions as clinical nurses in a new cardiac care center of a local competitor. The CNO thanked the manager for coming to her with what was thought to be an unsolvable dilemma. The CNO then met with the unit director, the vice president (VP) for human resources, and through a collaborative approach, they developed and proposed a plan to retain these expert clinicians. The CNO approached the situation by stating that the loss of these experts would impact, not only patient care today, but patient care in the future because these nurses cared for individual patients, oriented new nurses, shaped practices in care delivery, and ultimately contributed to the professional work environment. The mutually agreed upon plan did include a raise in pay; however, a retention bonus was not offered. The CNO’s decisive action resulted in 5 of the 6 experts choosing to remain in their clinical positions. Her ability to listen deeply to what the nurses were conveying to her, to act on her value of clinical nurses’ expertise and contributions to patient care delivery and professional practice, to partner with the nursing director and human resources VP to create a reasonable plan, and to thank both leadership and the clinical nurses for trusting her enough to bring their dilemma to her attention demonstrated caring leadership in action.

A second CNO remarked that being present and focused at every meeting he attends or leads is necessary because he is responsible for 60 cost centers. He is...
accountable for every decision he makes because each decision impacts the leaders and staff of those departments and ultimately the patients and family members served. Being present takes discipline. One way to create a habit of being present begins by taking a deep breath and at the same time consciously bringing oneself to the present moment. Shifting posture by placing both feet on the floor, folding one’s hands on the table or in your lap if there is no table, leaning in, facing the person(s) fully, and aiming your heart at theirs. By smiling and making eye contact and listening to the other(s) intently while withholding any judgment that may be forming and avoiding any distractions, including cellphones and computers, are critical elements of being present and demonstrate caring leadership. In fact, if the meeting is in your office, be sure to close the door to deter interruptions, and turn your cellphone to silent and place it out of reach. If a distraction occurs, take notice and remind yourself to return your focus to the person(s) in front of you.

A colleague of one caring leader commented that the chief operating officer (COO) has a way of making you feel as if he has all the time in the world for you. This COO believes that because he engages fully, he actually spends less time overall. He connects first at the personal level, acknowledges the individual(s), and moves to collaborative conversation and decision making, knowing that the solution is a shared experience.

**Curiosity**

Being inquisitive and curious often leads to new, unexpected information and solutions. The simple act of asking questions leads to greater understanding, clarity, and even new possibilities. Caring leaders, shift from being the one with all the answers to the one that is intellectually humble and asks questions. However, by asking questions, does one appear indecisive or unknowable? When we are under pressure, do we hunker down to get the job done and forego curiosity as an unnecessary waste of time? The answer is no because in reality, being curious does just the opposite: it instills confidence that often leads to better decisions and solutions. Caring leaders demonstrate curiosity, which moves their teams to higher performance.

“If a meeting is not going well, and individuals are angry and lashing out, I put myself in their shoes so that I may have a greater appreciation of their perspective, and I ask myself, ‘How am I showing up? How am I being perceived? Am I maintaining eye contact and am I totally present with the person(s) I am speaking?’” It’s important to remind oneself that those we meet with are experts in their field and encourage them to use their knowledge and expertise to address the complex issues we face. It’s the leader’s role to ask more than speak.

**Decisiveness**

A leader who is willing to make decisions with the information at hand trusts themselves and knows that adjustments may be needed along the way. Caregivers expect leaders to seek information and act when needed so that movement forward continues. Without decisiveness, others are left waiting and without confidence in their leader.

One CNO described his willingness to make a decision knowing that it was the best decision at the time and trusting that his experience and intuition would lead to the best decision in the situation. He stated that in his decision making, he sets the bar high, stays personally involved, and maintains a laser focus on what is needed to be successful. “I work to empower my leadership team, trust that they will do their best, and I remove barriers so that the seemingly impossible becomes possible. When we achieve our goal, leaders express their pride in accomplishing the goal despite feelings of being overwhelmed at the onset. I am willing to roll up my sleeves and find solutions to issues and problems as they arise. I see myself as solution focused and positively approach all situations so that each team member’s best ideas and creativity are brought to the table.” A recent example of the need for decisiveness occurred on how the organization was reporting C-diff cases. The CNO and chief quality officer agreed to immediately initiate a weekly 7 a.m. meeting to resolve the issue. Within a short time, a nurse-driven protocol with order sets approved by the medical staff and supported by nursing staff was created and implemented, and today, C-diff reporting has significantly improved.

**Empathy**

Empathy is the ability to hear another’s story or perspective, and recognize the emotions that are being conveyed while suspending one’s own judgement. It is being with another and simply listening without trying to make things better, without sharing your own experiences as a comparison or looking for the silver lining in the current situation. Empathy is a vital caring leadership behavior because it strengthens connections with others and allows others to feel acceptance for who they are without feeling judged, ashamed, or inadequate.

Acting on our understanding of others experience is empathy in action or compassion. For example, one CNO’s organization recently conducted a social needs assessment of over 1000 employees scheduled for routine tuberculosis screening. Over 300 employees identified food as their number 1 need. Addressing this need required an empathic approach to preserve employees’ privacy while providing avenues for access to food. Caring leadership requires congruency of our words and actions in conveying empathy and human
connection. Connecting at the human level is essential before leaders can move to outcomes. The goal is to gain commitment, not compliance.

After reading about caring leadership and the 5 behaviors illustrated by 3 executives who have achieved impressive results, complete the following self-assessment to gauge your own caring leadership skills (Table 1). You likely are a strong, competent leader who has a successful track record of accomplishments, yet there may be a few specific behaviors you can use on a consistent basis to achieve uncommon results for you and your organization.

Now that you have completed the self-assessment, congratulate yourself on behaviors you perform all of the time, acknowledge those performed most of the time, and identify actions you can take to improve behaviors performed some of the time. Consider hiring an executive coach to assist you, asking for colleague

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**Table 1. Caring Leadership Self-Assessment**

*Please complete the self-assessment and identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth as you move to being a caring leader.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caring Behavior</th>
<th>Some of the Time</th>
<th>Most of the Time</th>
<th>All of the Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-awareness</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Do I sense and adjust my emotions based on the situation?</td>
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<td>Do I respond in a thoughtful way?</td>
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<td>Do I self-correct to keep communication flowing?</td>
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<td><strong>Deep listening</strong></td>
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<td>Do I maintain eye contact and face the person(s) directly?</td>
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<td>Do I adjust the environment and limit distractions?</td>
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<td>Do I suspend judgement on what’s being said?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Being curious</strong></td>
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<td>Do I ask questions to stimulate new thinking?</td>
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<td>Do I make space for new ways of thinking?</td>
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<td>Do I encourage innovation and respect mistakes?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Demonstrating empathy</strong></td>
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<td>Do I connect first before focusing on the output or results?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do I listen and acknowledge the feelings of the other person?</td>
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<td>Do I support others with caring and compassion?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Decisiveness</strong></td>
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<td>Do I gather information that leads to great decisions?</td>
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<td>Do I make course corrections as new information is presented?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do I engage and trust others input into decisions?</td>
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feedback, enlisting your human resources leader in conducting a 360 evaluation and/or performing self-checks on a regular basis. Not only you will benefit from your caring leadership, but members of your organization will, too, and you will achieve uncommon results! All the best to you on your caring leadership journey.

REFERENCES

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