Very recently I was invited, in my role as the new chief nursing officer for Scotland, to give a pre-dinner speech to the cohort of senior clinical leaders on Scotland’s Delivering The Future programme. Now in its fifth successful year, this programme – funded and supported by the Scottish government and NHS Scotland – has helped develop the strategic capabilities of clinical leaders across the country and placed clinical professions at the very heart of strategic decision making in government and in all NHS boards.

Although I have never given a pre-dinner speech before, I have (as you may imagine) sat through a fair few. So I knew that my mission, if I chose to accept it, was to divert the members of my audience from their real business – that is, eating and networking – with the minimum level of resentment and boredom possible.

The group had asked me to talk about my personal leadership journey so, with my mission in mind, I rejected the traditional PowerPoint presentation or formal written speech and, instead, told the story of my life and career. This I used as a vehicle to communicate my leadership approach and the many lessons that I had learnt along the way.

This is something I have been doing a great deal since taking up my role earlier this year. Warren Gamaliel Bennis, who is regarded as a pioneer in the field of leadership studies, wrote that, “becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself”. I think that how I behave, as well as what I actually do as a leader, reflects who I am. So by adopting this “narrative approach” I have been able to connect more quickly with people, both as a leader and as a human being.

This approach has proved to be a powerful tool in helping me develop relationships and a shared understanding of culture and practice, as well as my priorities for nursing in Scotland. It also means that I actively demonstrate the values based approach to leadership that I prefer and which has equipped me to deal more effectively with the ups and downs of life and the rapid change and uncertainty that characterises healthcare. If that sounds overly idealistic or even a bit vague to some of you let me try and illustrate what I mean.

One of the lessons I learnt early in life was that education empowers and liberates the individual to make changes and to take control of their future so my old school motto, “learn to be free”, has remained an enduring value shaping my decisions, actions and behaviours. But what did that look like in practice?

As a practising nurse I took every opportunity I could to educate patients, colleagues and students. I spent several years in formal educational posts and then, later, as a senior leader in various NHS organisations, made sure that I prioritised investment in education, training and development for staff, and facilitated lifelong learning for the self and others by teaching and coaching.

In my personal life the same value has informed how I operate as a parent, which charities I support and has influenced my decision to remain as a school governor for over 10 years. As you can see, values like this can stay with you from job to job and organisation to organisation; they allow you to be grounded yet focused on the future; they ensure you are flexible and adaptable; and, because they transcend context and experience, they provide a constant link between the past, present and future.

I believe that a value-based approach to leadership will be vital if nursing is to meet the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. One of the main issues facing the profession is the high level of political uncertainty resulting from a new coalition government in England and forthcoming elections early next year in Scotland and the rest of the UK. Nurses need to understand devolution, how health policies and healthcare structures are becoming increasingly divergent across the four countries so that those issues common to the profession as a whole – such as the shift to graduate registration, professional regulation, advanced practice, and the movement of care out of the acute sector and into the community – can be dealt with.

‘The value based approach to leadership has equipped me to deal more effectively with the rapid change and uncertainty that characterises healthcare’

Value-based leadership will also enable nurses to demonstrate the sort of responsible, authentic and measured leadership that will be required as we embark on the extended period of economic constraint. It will help them balance innovation with risk, think long term but deliver results, decentralise yet control, and maintain staff morale and teamwork while making tough service and workforce decisions.

For the nurses in Scotland tasked with meeting the three quality ambitions set out in The Healthcare Quality Strategy for NHS Scotland, value-based leadership will also ensure that we continue to tackle inequalities, drive preventive healthcare and ensure that people receive safe effective person centred care from capable, caring and competent professionals.

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