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Leadership guru tells nurses the key to good leadership is to be the leader that you would want to have

Montreal, Canada; 4 July 2023 - ICN Congress was treated to a masterclass in leadership from world renowned inspirational speaker Simon Sinek and Canadian Chief Nurse Leigh Chapman.

The masterclass, moderated by ICN Deputy Chief Nursing Officer David Stewart, heard from Mr Sinek that health care systems are lagging ten or 15 years behind the corporate world when it comes to implementing the latest leadership theory.

Mr Sinek, who appeared by video link, said too much health care is run by people with no experience as health care workers, and the first priority of leaders should be to care for the people doing the care.

He said nurses should see leadership as a practice that needs to be constantly improved.

“You can be the leader you wish you have. Leadership is a practice, and you have to keep learning. It is important to have empathy, not just for your patients, but also for each other. You should read books on leadership, discuss them and start a book club. You will get new leadership tools. Senior leaders are not bad people, but they need to improve their leadership practice.”

Dr Chapman said it was crucial to recognise how important their work is: “We need to see our work as transformative. If we are focused on the needs of patients, we will make good decisions.”

Mr Sinek said it is important for leaders to be realistic, rather than pretend that everything is going well without any problems.

“Optimism is not naive, but we must not pretend that everything is great. We need to be realistic. If a leader pretends everything is perfect, staff will not feel they can say when things are going wrong.”

He said leaders need to be empathetic and to show they care about the people they are responsible for.

“When we take care of each other, the patients will be cared for. Ask each other if you are OK – it’s very powerful to know that somebody cares.”

Mr Stewart said nurses should take time to stop and reflect on what has happened, especially in traumatic situations, such as when a patient dies after a resuscitation attempt and where there is a tendency for staff to drift off to their next tasks.

Mr Sinek said COVID was very tough for nurses, and it also made everybody be more reflective because suddenly they were scared.

“Suddenly we were really worried about each other. I hope that humanity continues after the pandemic. It only needs one person to say, ‘I’ve got you.’ To say you are not alone is the most

powerful thing you can say to anyone. The pressures on us are intense. We know about integrity, but being supported by even one person gives us the courage to do what is right.”

Ms Chapman, who was appointed last year and has spent a lot of time travelling around Canada to speak to nurses on the ground, said nurses are very vulnerable: “ We have jumped to resilience when we talk about nurses, but we should recognise our vulnerability. We are all nurses; we can only achieve the transformation that we need together.”

Mr Sinek said he did not like using the term mental health: rather he talks about ‘mental fitness’.

“People should work on their mental, just we work on our physical fitness. In the UK military they have ‘mental health units’ – psychologists and psychiatrists - who care for health care staff who are working under combat conditions. Why not have that in healthcare generally? You have also been working under combat conditions.”

Mr Stewart asked about how to deal with the destructive effects of tribalism in healthcare. Mr Sinek said: “Everyone wants to belong, but it is unhealthy when we think our tribe is the best. We work in a team, and we need gratitude for each other.”

Dr Chapman added: “Gratitude and respect for our colleagues helps elevates the conversation about what is best for nurses: finding solidarity is the key.”

Mr Sinek suggested that what is needed is a leadership curriculum for health care workers: “There is an opportunity to fill that gap. Leadership should be taught in initial training. The skills of being a nurse are different from those of being a leader. Leadership is not about being in charge - it’s about taking care of those in your charge. The job of leadership is to see those around you rise, to set each other up for success. It’s like being a parent. Managers need to walk around and catch people doing what’s right rather than what’s wrong”.

Dr Chapman said new entrants into the profession need support from mentors. “We need to recognise the gifts that student and new nurses bring, and their insights. We need them for our renewal. We shouldn’t shut them down for what they can’t do.”

When asked by Mr Stewart about how to support each other, Mr Sinek said: I have a rule with my friends – no crying alone, because when we try to do everything alone, that’s when the loneliness increases. Be with people, sit next to them in the mud, and when they are ready, that’s when I go into problem-solving mode.”

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