

**BUILDING
YOUR
PERSONAL
POWER
BASE
AS A STUDENT
AND NEW NURSE**

By Carol Huston

FEW NEW NURSES AND EVEN FEWER NURSING STUDENTS GIVE MUCH THOUGHT TO ESTABLISHING A PERSONAL POWER BASE. YET, IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE ORGANIZATIONAL OR PERSONAL GOALS WITHOUT AN ADEQUATE POWER BASE. IT IS EVEN MORE DIFFICULT TO HELP PATIENTS, OR CLIENTS ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS, WITHOUT A POWER BASE BECAUSE POWER OFTEN DETERMINES THE DEGREE TO WHICH YOU HAVE ACCESS TO AND CONTROL OVER RESOURCES.

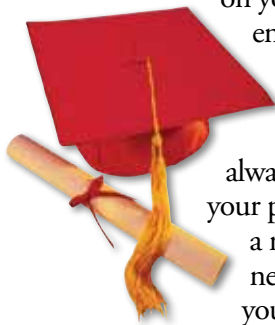
Gain Expert Power

Expert power is gained through knowledge, expertise, or experience (Marquis and Huston, 2009). Student nurses build expert power as a result of cumulative clinical experience, as well as work experience gained outside of school. The more clinical experience you have, the greater your self confidence and skill level will be. In addition, both students and new nurses can increase their expert power by earning specialty certifications, such as pediatric and adult advanced life support, pressure monitoring, and EKG interpretation. These skills increase your job marketability and provide additional tools to use in caring for patients.

New nurses should also plan to advance their education, whether this is to earn a bachelor's, a master's, or a doctoral degree, depending

on your point of entry into the profession.

Higher education always increases your power base as a result of the new knowledge you've gained.



Mentors and Positive Role Models

Positive role models are contagious as are negative role models. If you associate primarily with disgruntled, complaining individuals, it is likely that your behavior will reflect theirs. Identify positive role models of nursing excellence and emulate their behavior. Colleagues who enjoy their work and are committed to life-long learning will likely be recognized as positive role models and professional nurse who make a difference in the patient care.

Mentors, however, are even more important than role models in

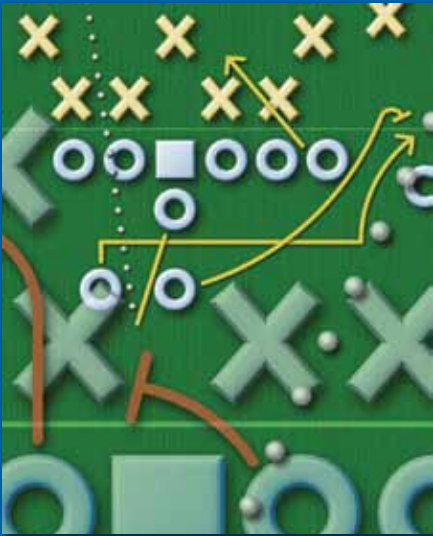
building a personal power base since mentoring is more active. The College of Mass Communications and Informational Studies (CMCIS) Alumni Society defines mentoring as “a developmental partnership through which one person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspective to foster the personal and professional growth of someone else” (CMCIS, 2008). Many novice nurses need time to learn the complexities of the professional nursing role, and having a mentor is absolutely critical to their success. A mentor will show you the ropes, tell you about the hidden organizational taboos, protect you from bullies, and give you that “in” you need when getting started on the right foot as a new nurse.

Form Coalitions with Other Professionals

By joining the National Student Nurses' Association® students can learn the power that can be gained through collective action and networking. Similarly, new nurses should become involved in both specialty clinical associations as well as national or international nursing organizations. This is an excellent way to stay abreast of the bigger issues in the field and to form networking opportunities for lifelong career development opportunities.

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STRATEGIES YOU CAN USE IN BUILDING A PERSONAL POWER BASE



1. Gain expert power
2. Seek out mentors and positive role models
3. Form coalitions with other professionals
4. Work hard and be a team player
5. Seek counsel appropriately
6. Be self aware
7. Focus on leadership development

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Be a Team Player

Novices or newcomers to organizations should pay their dues by volunteering for extra shifts or taking on new and difficult challenges. There are few shortcuts here as both respect and credibility typically must be earned. Similarly, students or new nurses who willingly help out their co-workers, especially without being asked to do so, are viewed as team players. Not only does this earn the respect of your co-workers, it creates a sense of belonging that helps build a positive organizational culture.

Seek Counsel Appropriately

Many students and most new nurses are afraid to ask questions for fear others will think that they know less than they should. Seeking counsel appropriately with experts or veterans in the organization

is an excellent means of building personal power because it suggests you are appropriately cautious, that you know when you need expert opinion before proceeding, and that you are not an impulsive newcomer who has all the answers (Marquis and Huston, in press).

In addition, in her landmark work *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice*, Dr. Patricia Benner suggests that nurses become expert only after developing skills and an understanding of patient care over time through a sound educational base as well as a multitude of experiences. “In short, experience is a prerequisite for becoming an expert” (Dracup and Bryan-Brown, 2004). Novices then, whether students or new nurses, must ask questions when they are unsure how best to proceed. Indeed, it is their professional duty to do so.

Self-Awareness

Because the importance of being self-aware is repeated so often in nursing school, many students and new nurses underestimate the

importance of this trait. All individuals must carefully examine their value system and recognize the role it plays in how they make decisions and resolve conflicts, and even how they perceive things. Uncertainty and anxiety may result when nurses make decisions that conflict with their own personal beliefs, which can eventually produce stress and job dissatisfaction (Marquis and Huston, 2009).



Leadership Development

The leadership skills nurses need are increasing almost daily. In fact, the leadership skills nurses are *expected* to have in the 21st century are overwhelming. With health care now being big business, nurse leaders must have expertise in budgeting, finance, and marketing. They are also “expected to be skilled communicators, organizers and team



builders and even to be visionary and proactive in preparing for emerging new threats such as terrorism, biological warfare, and global pandemics’ (Marquis and Huston, 2009). Nurse leaders at the organizational and unit levels must address high staff turnover rates, a growing trend toward unionization, and the need to implement staffing ratios in an era of nursing shortages. The current leadership expectations of nurses are very high.

Many new nurses feel that their leadership skills are inadequate to meet these 21st century leadership challenges. In some cases, it’s because they have had inadequate formal education or experience in leadership and management. In many cases, though, nurses simply didn’t pay enough attention to this aspect of their nursing education because they didn’t think it pertained to them. Others perceive a need to know these skills, but are unprepared for how *quickly* they would be expected to assume these roles as new nurses.

New nurses should seek out leadership and management development courses, beginning with basic leadership skills including time management, delegation, team building, staffing principles, and conflict management. As confidence and skill levels in your personal leadership increase, seek additional education in leadership and management related to human resource management, strategic planning, outcomes measurement, and healthcare economics. All of these skills will allow you to become the highly skilled leader and manager you want to be, and to build a personal power base that allows you to accomplish your goals. ∞

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