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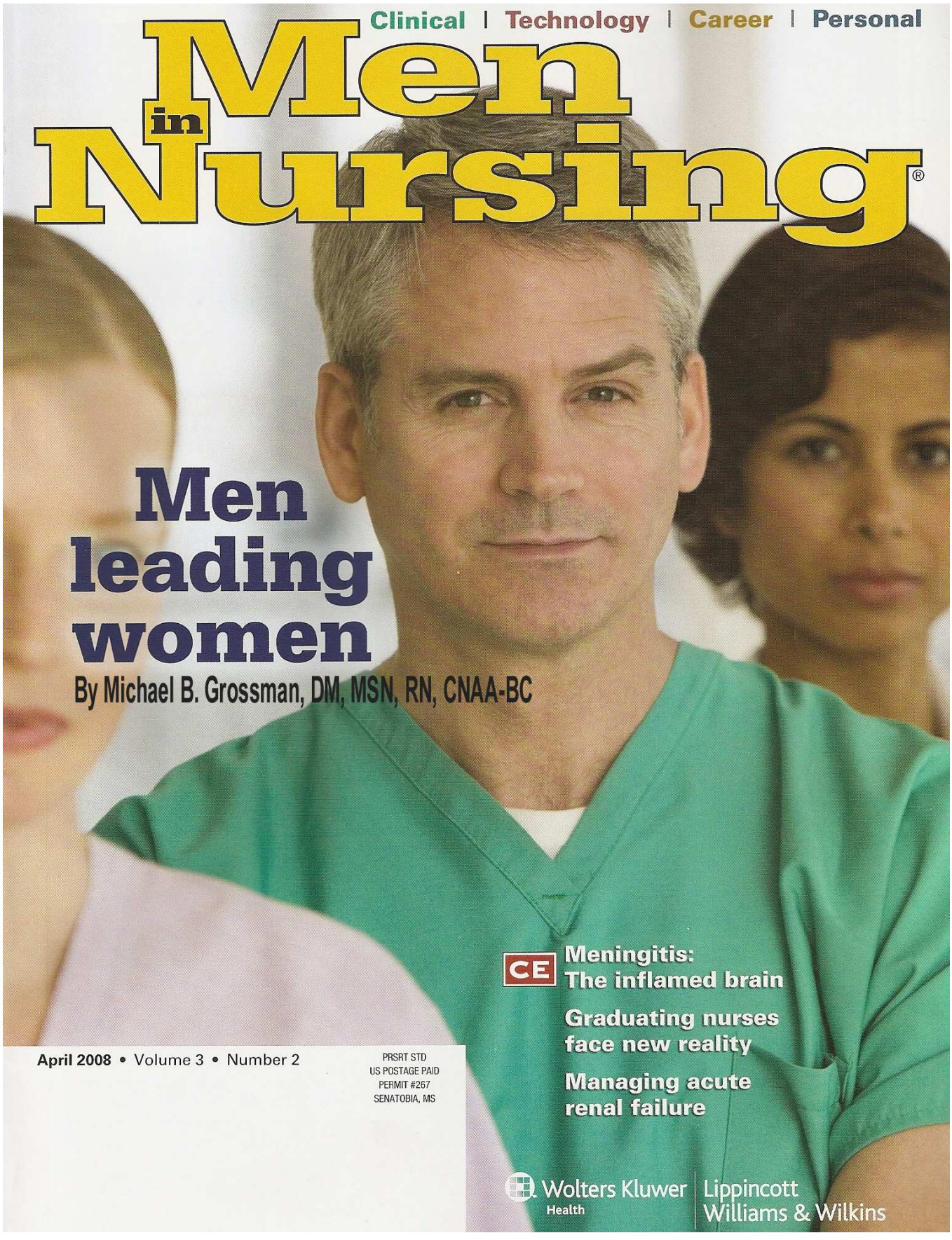

Men leading women

By Michael B. Grossman, DM, MSN, RN, CNAA-BC

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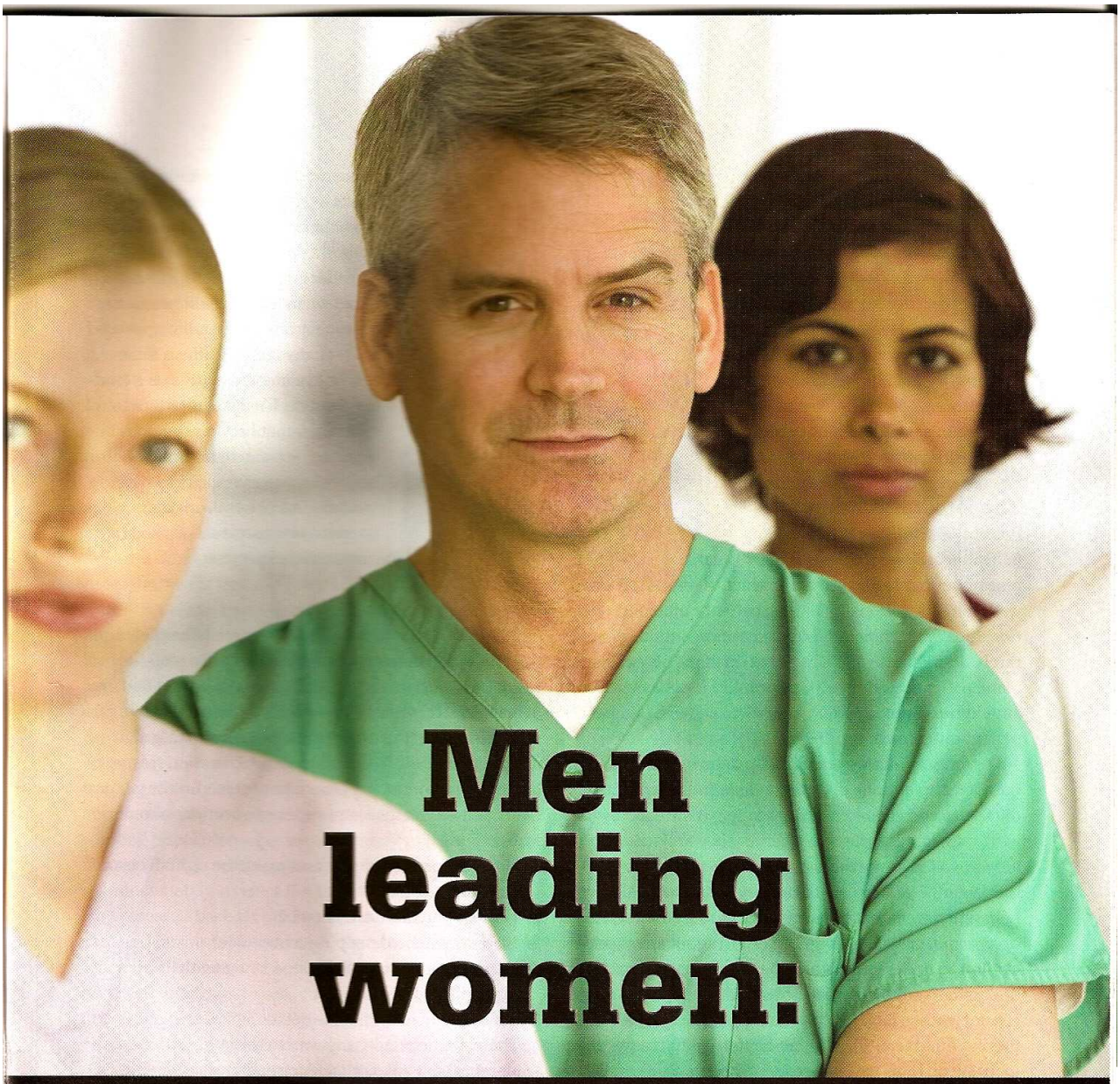


Men leading women:

Are there differences to consider?

By Michael B. Grossman, DM, MSN, RN, CNAA-BC

The goal is not necessarily understanding women, but understanding the uniqueness of people.

Being a man who's leading women can be challenging. The goal is not necessarily understanding women, but understanding the uniqueness of people. Consider a comprehensive review of what it takes to be a successful leader and the unique way it relates to leadership of women.

There are a few books written about "everything men know about women."[1,2] Some may seek out these books,

eager to discover pearls of wisdom that can be used as fathers, husbands, and nurse leaders in a field that is 94% women. Unfortunately, in some of these books, the authors suggest that men know nothing about women. Here, we'll provide a comprehensive review of the literature, and include the author's lived experience as a man who has spent 30 years in several nursing leadership positions.

Our primary focus as leaders should be on promoting teamwork to achieve optimal patient outcomes.

The latest literature

Possibly the most dramatic finding in healthcare research in the last 10 years was researcher Linda Aiken's work, which showed that there was a direct relationship among patient outcomes, relationships, and teamwork.[3] It makes sense intuitively, but rarely do we pause and say, "If we don't get along as a team, patients could die." Our primary focus as leaders should be on promoting teamwork to achieve optimal patient outcomes.

Diversity enhances teams and results in better patient outcomes; every one of us is a unique individual with different and valuable views. A leader who treats people with respect, regardless of whether they are male or female, will receive respect back. It's been suggested that people can have anything they desire in life if they help others get what they want.[36] That's a sound philosophy, especially if it's coupled with the concept of seeking first to understand others before trying to have them understand one's own point of view.[4-6] Basically, successful leaders look for the good qualities in other people and build teams based on their strengths rather than focusing on their weaknesses.[7,8]

Wired differently?

Communication is one of the most important skills a leader needs. Men and women seem to approach the world differently, and that contrast has been covered extensively by numerous authors.[9] One of the most relevant differences that may be observed is that men (in general) tend to keep their thoughts inside when thinking over a problem, while women (in general) tend to discuss issues out loud, to seek other opinions when formulating solutions. Again, it's important to avoid generalizations, and to treat each individual as a unique human being with his or her own collection of lived experiences.

There are also some excellent books available for anyone who wants to cultivate communication skills.[10-12] It's important for men to consider communication differences when working with women, to respect diversity, and to appreciate that anyone may offer a different, but valid, perspective on a leadership style. It's also important to remember that how one person wants to be treated, may not be how everyone else wants to be treated. This is why leadership needs to be contextual—based on the situation and the particular employees.[13,14]

What is good leadership?

Quick tips on how to manage women aren't helpful in the long-run. There's no cookbook for leadership—an NFL coach can win the Super Bowl one year and end up in last place the next with virtually the same players. Also, there aren't dramatic differences in leading men and women. Basically, good leadership is about respect, listening, and providing timely, honest feedback.

Many people ask the same series of questions about leadership:

1. How do you take charge and make the right decisions as a manager?
2. How do you motivate people?
3. How do you hold people accountable?
4. How do you get people to stop bringing their personal problems to work?
5. How do you make people get along?

There are no simple answers to these questions, as leadership isn't an exact science and must be highly individualized to the situation and the people involved.[15] Much of the practice of leadership isn't evidence based, but instead is based on anecdotal and theoretical discussions.[16] Thus, there are many myths about leadership that may work in the short run but over time lead to failure. This includes approaches like taking care of people so much they learn to be helpless, focusing on people's weaknesses to the point that it destroys their motivation, and being so outcome focused as to fail to look at certain important factors. For example, people often have difficulty separating their personal and professional lives. Sometimes life gets in the way of work. However, maybe if we show a little compassion for the challenges our workers face in their

lives, they will be reenergized about their work.

There are many great examples of charismatic leaders in sports and politics like Vince Lombardi, Bill Parcels, and General Patton. Unfortunately, they may have been given too much credit for their short-term success. It sounds good for a leader to come in, take charge, and sound tough, as long as he's ordering around someone else. Women may be less reluctant to speak their opinions about how oppressive these types of leaders are. In general, the women may see through these styles and realize that they don't have positive, long-term impacts. Studies with large sample sizes, of successful leaders, have shown that oppressive, controlling styles aren't effective in the long-run.[17,18] James Hoopes did a comprehensive review of the history of management in the United States and suggested that much of our leadership practice came from approaches that worked in training military and in managing slaves.[19] Those approaches are no longer appropriate with today's working population who are more likely to leave an organization if they feel they aren't being treated fairly.

One of the challenges of leadership is pleasing one constituency at the risk of disappointing another.

Unfortunately, most of the literature on leadership isn't research based. Connie Vance researched healthcare and business literature articles written between 1970 and 1999 and found only 4.4% (290) of 6,628 articles reviewed were data based. Further, the largest proportion of the research (120 of those 290, or 41.4%) was purely descriptive of the demographic characteristics or personality traits of leaders.[16] Although work in the social sciences indicates that leadership styles can have a major influence on performance and outcomes, minimal transfer of this work to the healthcare system is evident. Limited research on leadership and healthcare outcomes exists, such as changes in patient care or improvements in organizational outputs. In this era of evidence-based practice, such research, although difficult to conduct, is urgently needed.

How the best leaders lead

Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman studied 80,000 managers through their employee-opinion survey work with the Gallup Organization.[17] They found that leaders were forced to balance employee needs with the needs of the organization. One of the challenges of leadership is pleasing one constituency at the risk of disappointing another.[18] The best leaders often break the rules of conventional wisdom in order to achieve the best outcomes. Great leaders do the right thing for patients and employees. Buckingham & Coffman found a consistent set of strategies in the leaders whose employees ranked them the highest, such as:

- treating every employee as an individual
- focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses
- building a positive work environment.[17]

The method through which a leader achieves these outcomes is also important:

- hiring for talent, not necessarily experience
- setting clear expectations but allowing the employees to chose the steps to achieve the goals
- focusing on strengths and putting employees into situations that utilize their talents
- rewarding the right behaviors based on the desired outcomes.[17]

Gender was not a factor in the Gallup Poll of employee satisfaction. Employees, whether male or female, are motivated by the same climate of appreciation.[19] They want to work for a company with the following characteristics:

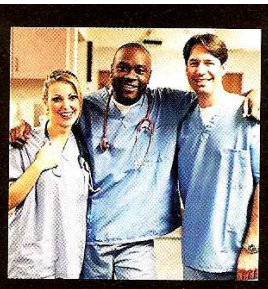
- a mission compatible with their personal values
- clear expectations
- the opportunity to do their best work
- proper equipment
- recognition for doing good work
- someone involved (not necessarily the boss) who cares about them as people
- someone who will work with them to review their progress and develop plans to learn and grow.[17]

Lastly, the Gallup results showed that employees perform better when they have vital friends in the workplace.[19] Remember, these recommendations apply to all employees, not just women.

How valuable are workplace friendships?

Some women may be more social employees, so it may not work to be overly focused on "getting back to the real work," as opposed to talking to coworkers. Social

networking is one of the keys to success in the workplace. Tom Rath's review of the literature on friendships suggested that friends can be the highpoint of one's day and that strong social relationships are the leading indicator of overall happiness.[19] This research isn't surprising, as nurses would likely rather work the weekend or night shift with someone they like than working with someone who wants to just do the work and go home. However, it's also amazing how many managers can be heard saying, "We don't have to get along, just get the job done." Rath has shown that vital friends improve productivity and engagement of employees.



Mentoring isn't just a one-way relationship, but actually a triad among the mentor, mentee, and the organizational culture.

Friendships tend to decline over time from the teenage years, when people spend nearly one-third of their time with friends, to the adult years, when they spend less than one-tenth. Rath's fascinating work on the value of friendships in the workplace is a combination of 70 years of Gallup surveys culminating in a database of 4.51 million respondents from 423,000 workgroups in 112 countries from 2002 to 2004.[20]

Friends can have a positive influence on our daily lives including healthy eating, increased levels of physical activity, enhanced ability to cope with stress, and more.[19] Women may bring more of a richness to the workplace through their emphasis on socializing, compared to the men who have been happy to just do the work and talk about last night's ballgame. The strength of marital relationships was shown by Jon M. Gottman and Nan Silver to be predominantly related to the level of friendship between spouses and satisfaction with life was dependent on the happiness of spouses, which in turn had an impact on work engagement.[21] All couples fight, according to Gottman, but happily married couples get along when they're not fighting. Gottman suggested that this same principle could be applied to any relationship.[21] The true mark of friendship isn't whether people have arguments, but whether they generally are happy in their day-to-day interactions. Successful leaders don't contain tension, but help employees to work through their conflicts in healthy ways.

Balancing multiple priorities

Women may be better socialized to multitasking than men. Despite many of the changes in our society through the years, women are often still the predominant partners who are responsible for the children in heterosexual relationships, and are often balancing that responsibility with a career. It's also been suggested that many women also feel a need to "do it all."[23] Therefore, a primary goal of the leader should be to help set realistic limits for employees, to help them balance work and nonwork issues. Nurses are in the business of caring for others and often neglect themselves. There are several excellent books on how to say "no" without feeling guilty that nurses may find useful.[24-28]

The importance of mentors

It's been suggested that mentoring isn't just a one-way relationship, but actually a triad among the mentor, mentee, and the organizational culture.[29] Leaders play valuable roles in creating environments that cultivate mentorships. Louise D. Jakubik found that the majority of mentoring in nursing is taking place in the first year when nurses are precepted.[30] Her research showed little evidence of mentoring taking place for senior nurses, which could account for some of the frustration that may be observed among experienced nurses.

Finding the right friends

Much of the misconception about relationships is due to the myth of "well-roundedness," a term used by Rath to describe the fantasy that any one individual can fulfill all of our needs for friendship.[19] In the workplace, people often look for one best buddy, rather than seeking out the unique characteristics of each of their coworkers. Studies have shown that 83% of people reported bringing different strengths to a friendship than their best friends.[19] Based on this data, Rath suggested we focus on the strengths of friends rather than their weaknesses, which is also consistent with other Gallup research regarding the value of focusing on employee strengths.[8] Think of your own best friends. Do you have one friend who fulfills every one of your needs, or do you have different friends who play different roles in your life? It's not uncommon for people to have different friends for socializing, for sharing deep concerns, and for helping to foster development. In the workplace, clinical mentors, lunch buddies, and true friends can all provide different

perspectives. This is where men and women working together can benefit patients.

Most human-behavior research has focused on individuals or groups, with little attention paid to one-on-one relationships, according to Rath.[19] While friendships play an important role in our personal and professional lives, most developmental work has been geared toward individual self-improvement or group development rather than relationship improvement. There is growing recognition of the importance of relationships in the workplace, as described in several recent popular books.[10-12] Research in healthcare has also shown there to be a direct relationship among patient outcomes, relationships, and teamwork.[3] Rath suggests that the gap between individual focus and fixing the entire group could best be addressed by focusing on improving relationships between two people at a time. Therefore, another goal for leaders is to focus on the relationships of employees one by one, rather than trying to tackle whole groups at a time.

Tips for men in working with women

So what do women want? What don't men understand? How does one manage women? It's not about understanding women, but about understanding the uniqueness of people. The first thing one should understand is the fallacy of the golden rule: doing unto others as you want done to you may not be correct. It's helpful to do unto others as they wish done, such as trying to express an interest in the things women are interested in. Most people like to talk about themselves, their family, their kids, and their work, so leaders may want to take the time to get to know people. Look for people doing things right, and make sure to praise them in a timely manner. Don't overreact when workers verbalize their concerns. Work on patience, cultivate communication skills, listen more, seek feedback, be honest about how you are doing as a leader and you will be successful in working with either women or men. M

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