10.2: The Nurse Leader as Change Agent

Nurse leaders must ensure the day-to-day operation of their unit(s) in a rapidly evolving health care system. Nurse leaders are often called upon to be agents of change and are often responsible for the success of a project. Yet the literature suggests that leaders continue to struggle with change despite the frequency with which they are involved in leading change (Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009; Quinn, 2004). A change agent is an individual who has formal or informal legitimate power and whose purpose is to direct and guide change (Sullivan, 2012). This person identifies a vision and rationale for the change and is a role model for nurses and other health care personnel.

Nurse leaders’ behaviours influence staff actions that contribute to change (Drucker, 1999; Yukl, 2013). The significant number of changes that nurse leaders face require new ways of thinking about leading change and adapting to new ways of working. Moreover, leaders work closely with frontline care providers to identify necessary change in the workplace that would improve work processes and patient care. As such, nurse leaders must have the requisite skills for influencing human behaviour, including supervisory ability, intelligence, the need for achievement, decisiveness, and persistence to guide the process (Gilley et al., 2009). Effective change management requires the leader to be knowledgeable about the process, tools, and techniques required to improve outcomes (Shirey, 2013).