



The Leadership and Professional Development column will take on a slightly new look in 2014. During the coming year, all of the authors featured will address ideas and strategies that were suggested in our January column—The Future of Oncology Nursing Research: Research Priorities and Professional Development. The following article on tribal alchemy speaks to the passion and purpose we all feel as oncology nurses, and offers strategies for harnessing our energies so that we can work together more effectively to translate research results into quality care for our patients at the point of service.

Tribal Alchemy: Turning Lesser Into Better, Together

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Close your eyes for a moment and perform an imaginative replay of your last three shifts or days at work. Try and recall faces, situations, issues, and accomplishments. Without knowing you, or your circumstances, it is relatively safe to assume your replay included challenges and opportunities. You may not have labeled them as such, but, indeed, that is what you encountered.

Every day, we face vexing challenges and promising opportunities (Meadows, 1997; Pepper, 1942). It is the landscape of health care and the landscape of life. The interplay among challenges, opportunities, and people is what I call the “C.O.P. Effect” (Fleming, 2014). At the intersection of these three dynamics—challenge, opportunity, and people—lies the possibility of meaningful and productive change. How leaders and organizations engage these dynamics increases or decreases effectiveness (Stoltz, 1997). The C.O.P. Effect yields simultaneous frustration and delight. On one hand, challenges create resistance that frustrate and thwart the savviest of strategic leaders. On the other hand, opportunities create possibilities that inspire needed innovations. The way in which people think, feel, and act during challenge and opportunity influences both productivity and progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

In light of the ubiquitous C.O.P. Effect, organizational theorists and practitioners consistently search for effective forms of organization and leadership (Mitroff, Mason, & Pearson, 1994). Now, in the 21st century, we must be skilled

at the facilitation of an ancient-future leadership art that I call tribal alchemy (Sweet, 1999).

What Is Alchemy?

History tells the story of a peculiar group of people known as alchemists (Maxwell-Stuart, 2012). Among other pursuits, alchemists obsessed over elaborate theories of transmutation, turning lead into gold. They spent their time searching for the right combination of substances that, when applied together, would make magic happen. As one can imagine, speculations, mythologies, and experimentations abounded in pursuit of that goal. Always the fun dinner guests, alchemists were ever-ready to share their latest attempts at transformation. Lead into gold? How ridiculous. What kind of nonsensical pursuit is that? Turns out, they were right (sort of).

The urge to turn lead into gold is one we all share. Ancient alchemists just had the wrong substance. Apparently, lead just would not cooperate. However, tapping into the urge to turn something lesser into something better is both primal and productive. For our purposes, we will define alchemy as the power or process of turning something common into something special. If change is inevitable, then alchemy is the way to make that change meaningful.

As the definition suggests, alchemy is not only a primal urge, but also an uber process (see Figure 1). This alchemic process begins when we cease to whine about our situation and instead notice that something lesser can be turned

into something better. For example, consider patient-centered care, clinical and nonclinical working relationships, quality issues and outcomes, unit or clinic outcomes and systems, coding and revenue issues. Each of those subjects or

See It: See into the potential of the challenge or opportunity. Notice it, reflect on it, explore it, and describe it. Great tribes do this through the art of questionmaking and strategic conversation.

Name it: Create collective ownership and frame the challenge or opportunity in realistic and optimistic ways. Make it tangible, changeable, and measurable. Naming it makes the challenge or opportunity real and creates a sense of responsibility for the needed change.

Engage It: Emotionally embrace and strategically use the challenge or opportunity as the raw material of change. Start with what you have and make it better. Find the gap between “what is” and “what could be” and work to close it. Bring the future into the present.

Transform It: Enhance people, situations, and relationships through the hard work of creative solutions and innovations. As a tribe, let the transformation teach you how to alchemize better in the future. Learn from it. Finally, celebrate the change to create energy for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Figure 1. Tribal Alchemy Process

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