



**ONL** | Organization of Nurse Leaders

Advancing a culture of health.

# 2020 Nursing Summit

**The Power of Our Stories**  
Moving from Story to  
Action to Influence



The Nursing Summit was an opportunity to celebrate professional nursing and for nurses to remind themselves why they chose the nursing profession and why they decide to stay.

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## **Executive Summary**

In January 2020, the Organization of Nurse Leaders (ONL) and the American Nurses Association - Massachusetts sponsored a Nursing Summit in central Massachusetts to bring nurses together and to develop their leadership skills by using stories to drive change. This was the second annual Nursing Summit organized by ONL, and it was co- led by a number of diverse professional nursing organizations from the New England region. The Nursing Summit focused on engaging clinical nurses and leaders alike in learning how to use stories to advance influence. Every participant in the room was a Registered Nurse (RN) and by design, all roles and titles were removed from name badges to eliminate hierarchy and enhance open and honest dialogue. The Nursing Summit was an opportunity to celebrate professional nursing and for nurses to remind themselves why they chose the nursing profession and why they decide to stay.

The 2020 Nursing Summit was entitled *The Power of Our Stories: Moving from Story to Action to Influence*. It was a highly interactive session that introduced the use of stories as a powerful means for expressing the essence of nursing and the valuable impact nurses make on patients and the overall healthcare environment. Throughout the day, nurses identified stories that communicated significant moments in practice and leadership. Participants practiced listening for understanding and co-creating stories through dialogue using a coaching model. The day was facilitated by Debra Gerardi, RN, MPH, JD.

From the 2019 Nursing Summit and subsequent analysis conducted by ONL, it was evident that nurses in this region consider having a stronger voice in organizational decision-making and improved nurse recognition as priorities for nursing practice. By actively seeking out stories and listening for meaning, stories become a powerful tool for advancing those priorities and developing all nurses as leaders. As Jay Geneske, Director of Digital at The Rockefeller Foundation, noted in the 2014 *Digital Storytelling for Social Impact* study, “storytelling is a powerful tool for inspiring action and change and influencing thought leaders and decision makers.”<sup>1</sup>

“Stories can be used to promote empathy and encourage positive change in how we approach patient care.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Digital Storytelling for Social Impact*, The Rockefeller Foundation, Hattaway Communications, Timshel, 2014.



## **Background**

The culture of nursing practice emerges from day-to-day interactions and the stories we share with one another. As leaders, promoting safe care and a healthy work environment requires that we focus on the stories we tell and how these stories influence our actions and reflect our values. Stories guide action by framing how we see the world around us, our work, and how we view ourselves. Stories impact our brain function and influence behaviors, including the capacity for empathy and compassion for others. According to scientist and author, Paul J. Zak, who has researched how stories shape the brain, “stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered, than simply stating a set of facts.”<sup>2</sup> Stories can inspire forward momentum, and they can also keep us stuck in old habits or ways of being.

In a series of three podcasts from the American Hospital Association (AHA), Elisa Arespachoga, vice president of AHA’s Physician Alliance, conducted interviews focused on the importance of storytelling and compassion in leading teams in today’s healthcare environment. In her interview with Laura Crooks, CEO of Children’s Village in Yakima, Washington, Crooks discussed the open dialogue among her staff and how listening to the stories they tell is crucial for understanding pain points. She emphasized the importance of leaders being vulnerable and leaning into the process of sharing stories.<sup>3</sup> When Arespachoga asked how leaders can use stories to enhance leadership practice, Emily Silverman, M.D., an internal medicine physician at the Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, emphasized that pairing data with a narrative creates an emotional effect, which is vital for advocacy and leadership. She further elaborated that storytelling is one of the most effective ways to communicate information and that humans tell stories to make connections with others. Silverman suggests journaling to get started with storytelling, noting that stories can be a method of self-reflection and healing as well as a method for connecting with an audience as a leader or as an advocate.<sup>4</sup>

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The World Health Organization designated 2020 as the Year of the Nurse and Midwife in an international effort to elevate the prominence and impact of nurses and midwives throughout the world, and by extension, improve the health of communities globally. The Nursing Now campaign and the American Nurses Association (ANA) offer strategies to empower nurses to lead through healthcare challenges and improve care. To promote nursing excellence, leadership, and innovation, ANA encourages nurses to share their stories and offers tips for impactful storytelling, including, “...make it memorable, compelling, and informative. Give your audience a new way to look at you and the nursing profession.”<sup>5</sup> The 2020 Nursing Summit offered nurses a deep dive into how to effectively tell and listen to stories in order to elevate the voice of nursing.

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<sup>2</sup> Zak, Paul J. “How Stories Change the Brain.” *Greater Good Magazine*, 17 Dec. 2013, [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_stories\\_change\\_brain](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_stories_change_brain)

<sup>3</sup> *Compassionate Care: Laura Crooks*, AHA *Advanced Healing* Podcast, 19 Feb. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Compassionate Care: Emily Silverman*, AHA *Advanced Healing* Podcast, 19 Feb. 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*



# 2020 Nursing Summit

## Who Attended?

- 272 RNs
- More than 60% were clinical RNs
- From five New England states
- Representing many different organizations and the full spectrum of nursing specialties

## Objectives of the Summit

1. Identify the power of story and how stories impact the structure of our brain and guide our actions.
2. Demonstrate level one and level two listening to deepen understanding when coaching others.
3. Describe common archetypal nurse stories that impact effectiveness, including stories that empower and stories that foster dependency or victim-narratives.
4. Identify how to use story patterns and themes as data to promote safer patient care and healthier work environments.
5. Weave together individual stories into the larger story of our Nursing community.
6. Design a personal development plan that heightens awareness of your own stories and how to reframe them to shift old habits and promote your professional goals.

## Description of the Day

The purpose of the day was to grow leadership skills among nurses. It began with opening remarks from former ANA President, Barbara Blakeney, MS, RN, FNAP, who focused on seeking out and seizing opportunities, and shared thoughts about navigating career paths by seeking mentors and staying in close proximity to great leaders. This welcome message was a highlight for many attendees who found Blakeney's career and stories impactful and inspirational. Next, attendees participated in a reflective activity during which they wrote down three ways they have led this past year and then shared their leadership examples with a nurse they did not know. After the ice-breaker activity, attendees listened to the first of nine clinical nurse narratives that were shared throughout the day.

“I believe that stories allow nurses to reflect on their current practice in order to become a better nurse and provide the best possible patient outcomes.”



## In their words: Excerpts from nurse narratives shared during the Summit:



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*“I advocated for the patient that we still had multiple things we could do to save this patient and that I didn’t think we should stop. After I stated this, multiple other people agreed with me, so we continued. Thankfully, after 27 minutes, we were able to regain a steady heart rate and circulation on the baby...I was able to spend some time with the parents at this point...They were incredibly scared and traumatized, but also grateful for our presence and expertise...I’m grateful for my 10+ years of experience and the confidence to be a patient advocate.”*

-Anna McNicholas, RN

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*“I have learned that silence itself can provide comfort and foster communication. This rang true for my patient because silence allowed her to express herself as I provided a listening ear...I collaborated with the social worker and case manager to provide maximum support for my patient...The battle between my human desire to simply cry with her as opposed to maintaining my professional composure was a struggle. Despite my personal struggle, this heartbreaking situation reinforced the importance of providing compassionate, holistic, patient-centered care.”*

-Edlaine Santana, RN

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*“We realized that our words mattered, our mindset needed to be singularly focused, and we needed to model non-negotiable mutual respect – every interaction – every day.”*

- Andrea Kelly, RN

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*“Your work family will find their way into every piece of your life. They will be your roommates, your travel companions, your wedding and baby shower hosts and eventually will plan your retirement party...Your home family will come to learn that you spending Thanksgiving at work is normal and that celebrating Christmas a day before or after everyone else doesn’t necessarily change the meaning of Christmas.”*

-Viki Garvin, RN

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Debra Gerardi coached the group on leading with attention and discussing the impact of the stories we tell. First, she asked the nurses to reflect on their story by asking: What has happened that has changed you? What has influenced your thinking? What has helped you learn? What themes or values or patterns recur in your stories? Gerardi then talked about the purpose of stories and how they impact us. She explained that stories are how we make sense of the world; they create context and can influence our perspective. Gerardi noted that stories are the currency of relationships and that they connect us to ourselves and to one another. Stories transmit values, norms, and lessons from one person to another.

Gerardi then focused on how we listen to stories. She explained that there are two levels of listening: listening for what the story means to me, and what the story means to the storyteller. When hearing a story, curiosity is essential: one must listen to the facts and what matters to the storyteller, listen for what you are learning through the story, and listen for how you are reacting emotionally to the story. It is important to process how you are impacted by the story: have you learned something new? Do you have a different perspective? Will you change how you do something in the future?

Attendees seated at tables with other nurses they did not know participated in two exercises to practice telling and listening to stories. The first exercise was *A High Point Story* during which nurses told a story of a high point in their careers when they were proud of their work. The second exercise was *Stories with Drama* and nurses told stories of something that bothered them at work or a situation that was challenging or frustrating. After these two exercises, each table got together and integrated what they experienced during the two exercises to understand the impact of stories. They wrote down what commonalities emerged, what they noticed about themselves when they were telling and listening to stories, and how stories can be used to amplify your voice or point of view.

Gerardi noted that stories are the currency of relationships and that they connect us to ourselves and to one another.

“*The human species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories*”  
– Mary Catherine Bateson



# 2020 Nursing Summit

## 5 Ways Stories Impact Nursing Practice

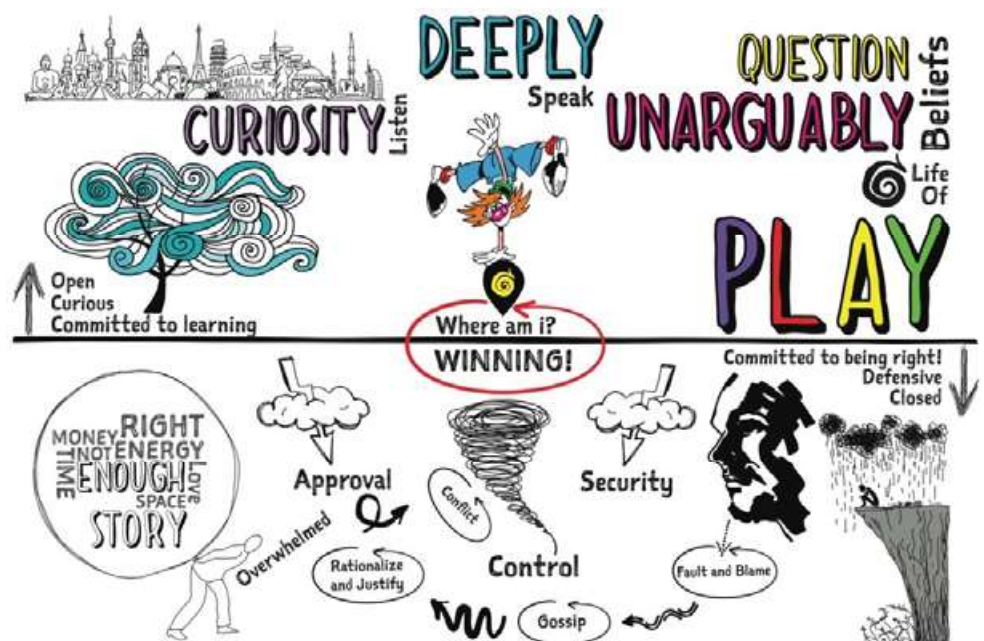
1. Create buy-in
2. Share values
3. Inspire and motivate others
4. Create transparency
5. Build trust



## The Line

*Locating Yourself – A Key to Conscious Leadership* from the Conscious Leadership Group was used to guide learning the difference between leading from trust versus threat. When “above the line,” people are open, curious, and committed to learning, compared to being “below the line,” when people are defensive, closed, and committed to being right. By being aware of the “line,” we can learn to monitor our thoughts and actions and aim to work above the line. In recognizing whether we are operating above or below the line at any point in time, we can bring awareness to how we are relaying stories and how we are listening to them. When above the line, we can share suggestions in a positive way and come up with creative ways to implement change, thus fostering a positive work environment.

“As a nurse leader, I realized how I often try to find solutions versus being curious and listening to meaning. This summit demonstrated the importance of this so that nurses have a stronger voice within the organization and are included in decision making.”



“Adding stories to our routine, habits, and practice environment can enhance the quality of listening, inspire others to learn and share, to grow together, to reduce burnout and know you are not alone, to bring nurses back to why they entered the field, to connect.”

In a session entitled *Leading with Intention: Leveraging Stories that Influence Others*, Gerardi discussed how leaders intentionally choose stories to influence or directly impact their audiences. In this case, the goals are to inform, to expand the audience’s perspective, and to inspire listeners to act. A leader must consider his/her audience and ask: who and what matters to them and what should they take away from the story? Savvy leaders make these connections in planning what stories to share and tell them in a way to hold the audience’s attention through “narrative transportation,” which transports the audience into the storyteller’s world and creates empathy. Further making this point, Gerardi discussed neural coupling and storytelling, highlighting that stories connect us emotionally and drive decision-making—a key component of leadership.

Attendees worked on engaging in dialogue and co-creating stories to practice listening and how to build on what is important to the other person, rather than selling or telling. Learning how to do this expands influence and impacts how decisions can be negotiated. This exercise supported individual leadership development by helping to build skills that encourage curiosity, create connections, and facilitate communication with others. Attendees talked about using storytelling to create influence in their nursing practice. They discussed how they can use stories to influence the strategic directions of their organizations, to influence staff behavior, to show appreciation for colleagues, and to influence policymakers.

The stories created during the Summit were woven together to tell a larger (meta) story reflecting on the dynamic practice of nursing, nursing contributions to communities, and the next generation of nurse leaders. Attendees committed to one action they could take to influence a decision-maker, influence nursing practice, expand the perspective of a colleague, or amplify their voices in their organizations or communities.



## Key Themes

The greatest overarching theme was the commonality of nurses' experiences and values, regardless of specialty or organization.

Several key themes emerged from the storytelling and integration exercises throughout the Summit.

### Collaboration and Teamwork

- Nurses highlighted the importance of interprofessional collaboration for better patient outcomes.
- Attendees noticed that the high point stories were never just about the storyteller, but often about a team, and credited others for successes.

### Patient Relationships

- Many nurses talked about their patients: advocating for them, being sensitive to their decisions or those made by their families, and the close relationships that develop among nurses, patients, and families.

### Empathy

- Nurses reflected on how well they related to each other's stories, removing feelings of isolation, and increasing feelings of shared purpose and a collective desire to share their knowledge.
- Nurses talked about belonging to a community, relating to staff through humanity, and preceptors that lead by example.
- When listening to stories, attendees noted nurses' empathy with patients and with one another.

### Leadership

- Nurses focused on deep listening, thoughtful preparation, and how to use stories to advance influence.
- Attendees reflected on the many nurses and leaders that influenced their careers and noted they are likely to influence other colleagues over the course of their careers.

### Appreciation and Recognition

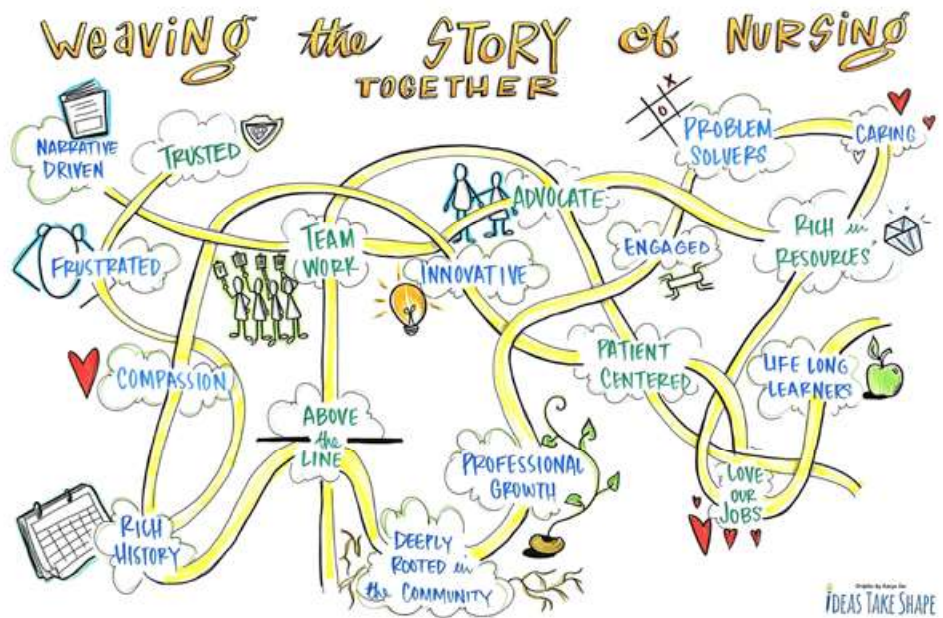
- Nurses highlighted the importance of appreciating and recognizing others' skills.
- They showed appreciation for the teaching, guidance, and mentorship that nurses provide to one another.
- Colleagues can be recognized by having avenues to share stories (staff meetings, social media, and newsletters) and by reading recognitions from patients provided in the DAISY award nominations or other cards and recognitions.

“*Stories are powerful and an essential tool in any leader's toolkit to influence best practice.*”



## Using Stories to Influence Nursing

When thinking about how stories can emphasize nurses' contributions to quality healthcare, attendees thought of stories as vehicles for building consensus, promoting empathy, improving communication, showcasing successes, self-reflection, and facilitating patient connections. To influence policymakers, attendees suggested sharing stories with legislators at the State House during lobby days, using first-hand accounts to relay impact.



### How Stories Influence Decision-Makers

- Persuasion
- Solidify arguments
- Offer diverse perspectives
- Inspire alternative thoughts
- Give decision-makers the tools to connect
- Validate requests

“I find my staff relate much more positively to a story than explaining a policy. They tend to relate the story to themselves and it helps them to remember policies and procedures much better. It has helped us improve documentation compliance and safety outcomes.”

Stories are essential for bringing people together and sharing new ideas, creating a healthy and happy practice environment, building relationships among colleagues, and influencing decision-makers within organizations and policymakers.

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## Conclusion

The 2020 Nursing Summit built on the resounding success of last year's Summit by focusing on developing leadership skills through storytelling and listening for deeper meaning. The Summit brought together the nursing community in an open dialogue to elevate the nursing profession by using stories to drive action and influence. Engaged nurses are essential to providing high-quality patient care and decreasing turnover. When nurses come together and nurture supportive work environments, the profession moves forward and can achieve its goals. By investing in leadership development for all nurses, ONL and co-leading nursing organizations are helping to advance the goals of the Nursing Now Campaign and improve the health of communities through nursing.

We look forward to the next opportunity to host such a thoughtful group of nurses and to continue the work of elevating the nursing profession and supporting nurses in their endless pursuit to provide the highest quality patient care.

### Ideas for Integrating Stories into Nursing Practice and Leadership

Stories can easily be incorporated into nursing practice, whether it is sharing a patient's story or giving a colleague the opportunity to tell his/her story.

1. Professional governance structures enable clinical nurses and nurse leaders to collaborate on important issues and share in decision-making. Use council meetings as a forum for sharing stories that illustrate challenges and successes.
2. Open staff meetings or daily huddles with stories and identify the common themes in the story.
3. Weave stories from nurses with data when presenting to boards, decision-makers, and policymakers. By using both quantitative and qualitative data from nursing practice to illustrate a need, nurses connect with their audiences and trigger action.
4. Be aware of behaviors that illustrate "above the line" and "below the line" thinking; work to create an environment that promotes teams staying "above the line."

“It was wonderful to have hundreds of nurses in the room, reflecting on how we can reframe situations.”

# 2020 Nursing Summit

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