

## Fostering leadership through collaboration

### Joy stealing: How some nurse educators resist these faculty games

By Kathleen T. Heinrich

While coaching may be the “signature” of nursing education (Schulman, 2005), research conducted in four countries between 1997 and 2004 reveals that relationships among faculty and administrative colleagues are often more tormenting than mentoring (Glass, in press). Unlike the horizontal violence that occurs among nurse colleagues in clinical settings, academic incivility has been shrouded in secrecy.



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In addressing the topic of incivility among faculty members, I asked an audience of 1,400 nurse educators at the National League for Nursing’s 2005 Summit to write about a time when a faculty colleague, administrator or subordinate said or did something that left them or a co-worker feeling disrespected, devalued or dismissed (Heinrich, 2006a). Two hundred sixty-one respondents described academic game-playing that results in what one called “joy stealing” (Heinrich, 2006b, in press). [See “[Joy-stealing games](#).”] That some regard joy stealing as a common phenomenon that occurs in both nursing practice and academia is evidenced by the rather cynical observation of one respondent: “Which story do you want? Nurses eat their young; faculty eat their young.”

Whether joy stealing is motivated by insecurity, jealousy or just insensitivity to the feelings of another, the result is the same. People targeted by joy stealers experience a range of negative emotions and loss of confidence.

For example, after describing one particularly painful episode in which an instructor’s enthusiastic report to her mentor was mercilessly shot down with a curt “Not a good idea,” the writer observed, “I had no confidence after that day.” For that educator, exuberance was replaced by self-questioning.

Another person ravaged by joy stealers described her situation as follows: “Senior faculty imply behind my back that my teaching method does not follow convention and make inflammatory remarks about my method to colleagues and students. I am in a new school using a new teaching method, and I am a new teacher. I experience great support from many faculty members. At the same time, a level of toxicity from a few faculty members has called into question my decision to follow my passion—that of becoming and now being a nurse educator and nursing education researcher.”

Her response? “I live in the margins of nursing education,” she wrote. “I live in shock at what I witness and experience in the academic culture. Practice was a safer place to exist.” For that educator, passion has transmuted into disbelief.

### **How to fend off would-be tormentors**

So how should you respond when you find yourself in the crosshairs of a joy stealer? In the following paragraphs, I amplify the resister role and offer three strategies for resisting these diabolical games. Like targets described in other workplace incivility research (Anderson & Pearson, 1999), nurse educators who responded to my request for real-life examples of joy stealing hinted that the most common response to being disrespected, devalued or dismissed is to ignore or avoid the perpetrator.

Research indicates, however, that passivity is not the most effective response. Episodes of tormenting, whether short-term or persisting over time, can result in trauma that lingers like a bitter aftertaste. Indeed, research suggests that targets of joy stealing can suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome, experiencing anxiety that can even result in suicide (Leymann, 2005).

More assertive targets in my sample described other, more effective ways to resist joy stealing. Consistent with Anderson and Pearson’s incivility research (1999), some, including the following respondent, sought support from others: “After being hired for my first teaching job and working hard to [prepare for the] interview, my boss (dean) referred to me as one of her ‘minority’ faculty, and a colleague stated that I really did not have to interview. I had all the qualifications: warm, degree, black. I received support from a friend who reminded me that I am an excellent nurse and am well-qualified as an educator.”

Others resisted by exiting their joy-stealing situations: “I wanted to attend graduate school for a second master’s degree and my boss, who is ABD [has completed “all but dissertation” for doctorate], did not want me to go. I knew in my heart she would fire me if I continued. I resigned and went on to school and ultimately achieved an EdD.”

Still others confronted their tormentors: “I was co-teaching a course. Students had to pass my section and the other instructor’s section to pass the course. A student flunked my section and therefore failed the course. She complained and her fellow students signed a petition saying the grading criteria were unclear and unfair. The other instructor signed it. When asked why, she said it was due to ‘peer pressure.’ I asked, ‘Who is your peer? The students? Isn’t it me?’ The VP for instruction called me into his office and was supportive of me.”

Another form of resistance, shown by the following response, is refusing to allow a tormentor to define one’s reality: “The boss asks me to lower the quality of my presentations/lectures because I have too much experience in teaching, and I make my colleagues look unprepared.” The resister’s response? “I have standards that I will not lower.”

A number of responses, including the following, were animated by the same emotional resilience, hope and optimism that were observed in a study by Glass (2001) of nurse educators: “The syllabus/calendar was all developed [without my input]. I was not involved in planning meetings. I was not wanted—not valued. I was a warm body, not a colleague.” The resister’s response? “I am very passionate about education. They won’t slow me down.”

“When I decided to pursue my doctorate and chose an EdD track, one of my colleagues made it clear that it was a ‘bad decision’—that EdDs (as opposed to PhDs) are unable to further nursing knowledge and expertise.” The resister’s response? “I am in an EdD track and very proud of it, I might add.”

### **Action strategies for resisting joy stealing**

To curtail joy-stealing games, it’s important to first develop awareness of the problem. In Part One of this article, published in the Second Qtr. 2006 issue of *Reflections on Nursing Leadership*, I sought to contribute to that awareness by identifying 10 common [joy-stealing games](#).

Once the problem has been identified, the next step is to initiate conversations about how to eliminate joy-stealing games from your work environment and create a positive, affirming workplace. Perhaps you are ready to initiate such a dialogue.

As part of a faculty meeting or retreat, invite your colleagues to respond to the following reflection questions, which are based on actual written responses received from educators who attended my workshop at NLN’s 2005 Summit. In the process, you and your group may bridge the gap between today’s reality and tomorrow’s possibility (Clark & Heinrich, in press).

#### **Action strategy #1: Own your inner tormentor**

Daniel Pesut (2004) challenged nurses to stop projecting blame onto others by taking responsibility for their own “shadow” qualities. That’s what one respondent did when she identified the tormentor within: “It hasn’t happened to me—I’ve done it to another! In a faculty meeting, I rather vehemently told a brand-new faculty member not to confront a student in private about being consistently late. Rather, the faculty member should provide guidelines to the student. It was the way I said it—not the content—that was wrong.”

Now it’s your turn. *Take a minute to write about a time when you disrespected, dismissed or devalued a colleague or administrator. Describe what it was like to play the tormentor.*

#### **Action strategy #2: Become allies**

When faculty members who observe joy stealing become allies, they lessen the possibility of its occurrence. In the following free-write, a respondent described how she shifted from observer to ally: “Faculty disrespected each other on a daily basis to the point that there were crying and tears in the hallway. I did nothing and let the perpetrator continue until weeks later, when I told the story at a faculty meeting.”

*Write about a time when you were protected by a colleague/ally, or when you acted as an ally to a colleague. Describe what that experience was like for you.*

### **Action strategy #3: Envision an ideal workplace**

According to Glass, joy-stealing resisters believe that workplaces can be positive environments, and they reject the notion that it's "just rhetoric or an impossible dream" (Glass, in press). As mentioned in Part One, only one respondent described a positive work environment: "I am fortunate to work in a place of support and respect fostered by administration and faculty alike. We nominate our peers (faculty members) for our own recognition awards and celebrate their achievements at faculty annual meetings. Faculty members voted to use some budgetary money for these awards" (Heinrich, in press).

*Write about collegial relationships in an academic workplace that you regard as ideal. How do the relationships in this ideal workplace match those in your current workplace?*

I welcome your feedback. Please let me know about efforts by your group to banish joy stealing from the work environment. My e-mail address is [drkth@att.net](mailto:drkth@att.net). RNL

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