

Nurse and Executive Director: Laurie Benson, BSN

[PODCAST TRANSCRIPT – April 15, 2024]

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Lisa Bonsall: Hi, everyone, I'm Lisa Bonsall, Senior Clinical Editor for Lippincott NursingCenter. Today I'm joined by Laurie Benson, the Executive Director for the Nurses on Boards Coalition. I'm thrilled to be speaking with Laurie today. Laurie and I have known each other for several years, working together to share the important work she and the NOBC team have been accomplishing to make nurses' voices heard. Thank you, Laurie, for joining me today.

Laurie Benson: Thank you Lisa. It's always great to spend time with you talking about our shared passion.

Lisa Bonsall: That is true. And the first thing I would like to start out with is your nursing story. Can you share what your journey has been and how you came to the NOBC?

Laurie Benson: Certainly. Well, I consider myself a small town girl and quite ordinary. Yet what I've always had is an unwavering belief that everything is possible. So I brought that optimism with me, throughout my career and I always had a plan. I tried to be open to possibilities that appeared on my path along the way. So when I graduated from the University of Wisconsin School of Nursing, my first job was working at the American Red Cross. Now, when you think about that, every day I got to meet people who were giving the gift of life. And that has forever shaped my view. When I meet others, I always see the good in them. And while I was working there, someone donated who was the branch manager secretary from Xerox. And she came up to me and said, I think you should come in for an interview. So I thought, well, that's interesting.

And so I went and had an interview, and next thing I knew, I was working at Xerox, an extraordinary company where I got to learn the importance of leadership, culture and values. And of course, I brought my nursing lens. So when I would call on my customers, I would always listen to them in terms of how we could make an impact and make a difference. And it was interesting. I started as a sales rep. Then I was the hiring manager for Wisconsin and then sales manager. And as I was listening to my clients, they were talking about the impending importance of technology in business. And while that sounds a little dated now, at the time, there really wasn't a good place to go to get the strategy, support and guidance for implementing technology in business.

So I've always been drawn to powerful visions. So I started a technology systems integration company with no background in technology, but knowing it was what customers told us they needed. And I was so fortunate to lead the company, serving employees, customers, our community and our industry for years. And I think about all the wonderful opportunities we had together. Everyone was empowered to

make a difference. And I was very fortunate to transition then at the time of sale, and I was loving my role serving on boards and consulting with other businesses.

Along came a phone call from the CEO of a hospital and said, Laurie, this has your name on it. It was about the Nurses on Boards Coalition. This new idea was coming to fruition, and she thought I might be interested. Well, as I reflected on it, I certainly wasn't looking for a job. But I thought about I could certainly relate to board leaders through my own board service for many years. I could relate to nurses, having my roots in nursing, and I loved this idea of improving health and communities. So I interviewed and was so fortunate, to be selected to serve in this role.

And as I reflect, I realize that I recognize and act on opportunities where I can make a difference. And everything I do is under that overarching umbrella of elevating ideas, people and organizations and the Nurses on Boards Coalition is an extraordinary opportunity to do all three. My parents taught us never to sit on the sidelines if we could make a difference. So I knew I would want to be part of the Nurses on Boards Coalition, and if I wasn't selected for the role, I definitely would have needed to volunteer because I just couldn't wait to see where this would go and how it could make good things happen.

Lisa Bonsall: Oh wow, that is so interesting, Laurie. All these years I've known you and I didn't know your roots and how you came into this role. Thank you for sharing that. So speaking of the NOBC, can you tell us more about it and the work that's been done and is currently underway?

Laurie Benson: Certainly. So when I think about the vision of our founders, Sue Hassmiller and Alicia Georges, after the Future of Nursing report was released, they invited leaders from national nursing associations to come together and talk about how they could improve health in our country. And I just think about that. Leaders came together. They had two meetings. One in the spring and one in the fall of 2014. And the vote was unanimous to continue on this shared vision of the importance of including a nursing perspective in board settings. And I just think about that. I'm so inspired by it every day that, this is unusual, this is unprecedented, that level of collaboration. And that really put us off on a path to soar and propel. So yes, we had to become a 401C3. And we needed to create an ecosystem across the country and all those things.

But I'm a nurse entrepreneur and I knew how to start a business, so I just couldn't wait until we could engage everyone and really leverage our collective strengths to make an impact. So everything we do follows our strategy. We have three strategic imperatives. The first is to facilitate strategic board placements that impact the social determinants of health, to ensure social justice and achieve health equity in communities. So the second strategic imperative is to demonstrate the value of nurses serving on boards, to identify barriers, and to disseminate that information so that others can see the impact that nurses have serving on boards. And our third strategic imperative is to continue our core work, which is to be a conduit for successful board placements. So under that framework, everything we do flows from those imperatives.

So if I just give a few examples, facilitating strategic board placements, we've established relationships with national organizations. And then we cascade those to the regional, state and local level to give opportunities for nurses to serve, for example, with United Way, the Alzheimer's Association, CASA and AARP as a few examples. One of the exciting things we're doing now is really focusing on creating board opportunities outside the profession, and we're working with the American Hospital Association to increase nurses' presence on hospital boards, with AARP to get nurses involved in the patient/family

advisory councils and other initiatives that are very important to have the nursing perspective. And when you think at the beginning, that the founders established a key strategy of 10,000 board seats filled by nurses, outside the profession by 2020, we really want to leverage that now. And it is so wonderful to see the receptivity of organizations to consider a nurse to serve on their board, as well as with all the demands on nurses today. Every opportunity we have, we see so many apply and they want to serve. This is their joy work. And this is where they can feel really great about making a difference. So that momentum is extraordinary in terms of the impact it has on all of us.

For the second strategic imperative about demonstrating the value of nurses on boards, we're so fortunate that we conducted the first of its kind research by surveying nurses who currently serve on boards to determine and learn from them, which social determinants of health are being impacted through their board service. And Lisa, it was phenomenal. We had over completed surveys. So as you can imagine, this also shows there's an interest in sharing this information. So, we're in the process of analyzing all that data. We published a few articles to talk about how the survey came to be. But, we saw that gap and knew it was important to do this work. In fact, we received a grant. We were one of organizations in the country to receive a Health Equity Innovations grant from the AARP Center for Health Equity and the Future of Nursing Campaign for Action, which is an initiative of AARP, the AARP Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. So we also had collaborators in AONL and AMN Health Care, because this was a significant survey that was conducted. And we're just so proud to be able to lead this type of work.

So then for the third imperative, one of my favorite things to do is visit our partners and our member organizations and others who invite us to come and engage directly with their nursing leadership and their nurses. And we get to talk about why nurses, why now? We get to talk about, well, where do I start? How can I prepare for board service, how do we find opportunities? And that educational aspect really empowers nurses to be equipped and most importantly, confident that they can pursue board opportunities. And I think it's important to acknowledge that none of us have all the answers, and that continuing to learn from each other and hear examples of our colleagues that are serving in these roles really helps be a catalyst to stimulate new thinking about where we can serve and how we can serve to have the greatest impact.

So when you ask what we're involved in now, there's one other example I'd like to share. Through the American Nurses Foundation, we received a significant grant called Supporting Underrepresented Nurses for Successful Board Service. So here we are working with the National Association of Ethnic Minority Nurses, Chi Eta Phi, and the Association for Men in Nursing. A representative from each makes up the steering committee, and we have just had such great insights through focus groups, surveys and now we're creating curriculum to help support these nurses to pursue and have successful experiences serving on boards. So for us, there are many pathways to engage nurses and include their perspective. But I've never felt more optimistic about the timing, the importance and the impact of nurses serving on boards.

Lisa Bonsall: Amazing. What incredible work. Thank you Laurie. It's just so inspiring for our profession and the future of our profession. and, you know, nurses have a perspective unlike anybody else. So just the value that's being brought to the table is wonderful.

Laurie Benson: And, you know, we're all in this together, right? And I should point out, our mission is to improve health in communities through the service of nurses on boards. So our mission isn't to get nurses on boards. Our mission is to improve health and who better than nurses to be so actively engaged in bringing that promise and that purpose to light?

Lisa Bonsall: Wonderful. Well, that is a perfect segue into the celebration happening now in 2024. It's the ten year anniversary of NOBC. So congratulations. What's ahead? What's happening?

Laurie Benson: Well thank you. This is such a great milestone, ten years for any startup organization. And I just had such a wonderful experience from start up to growth to stability and sustainability. I am so certain that the mission resonates with so many. And so how great it's going to be in June to bring so many together to celebrate that. And you know when you say what's next? Continuing to fulfill the strategies that I shared with you earlier. But I think the scale, scope, reach, and impact is the next phase for us. And when I think about what's most important, clearly we are going to continue to create more board opportunities, more strategic ones. We measure all of the board opportunities that we share through NOBC in terms of which social determinants of health we are addressing. And I see that as a rich opportunity in addition to creating more opportunities outside the profession.

And when you think about it, Lisa, what board wouldn't benefit from including the nursing perspective. So that's exciting and important work we have yet to do. And getting nurses in a position where they can impact strategies and policies that impact health. So in addition, that continued emphasis on the value of nurses on boards. So we've already conducted two qualitative research studies and published those. There will be, and we've just completed the inaugural value survey, so more research and we will have a further defined research agenda so that we can bring others together and really make this, robust in a number of ways. For all the reasons we discussed. We've got to be able to say this is the case for including the nursing perspective.

Then the other area that I would say is when we think about engaging with broader audiences, really leveraging the relationships we have so that we're represented in every industry and in every community. And I see that unfolding day by day. But that is intentional focus, and that is very important so that we're going to continue that work. One of the important aspects that we build in everything we do is celebrating and recognizing nurses who are exemplifying our mission in action. So of course, at our ten year anniversary, while recognizing many, we're going to be so proud to award the recipient of the Kimberly J. Harper and Marla J. Weston, NOBC founding Co-Chairs, scholarship that we give in recognition of the outgoing board chair, which this year is Kim Cleveland.

In addition, through our collaborative agreement with the Daisy Foundation, we will be honoring three recipients of our inaugural Daisy Nurse Leader Awards. And we are so excited to be able to make these awards. But we will also be recognizing all nurses for the important work that they do every day. And one of the most humbling parts of my role, NOBC considers itself as supporting cast. And I get to meet these extraordinary nurses across the continuum and to see all of their accomplishments, to hear them, to hear from those that they serve. It is extremely humbling to be in the presence of this profession and the nurses who make it what it is through service to others, and I don't know that they always recognize how important they are. And so we're doing our part to thank them and be grateful for every nurse in every role, whether it's clinical, academia, or in the community. It's just a thing of beauty for me to be immersed in the profession I am so proud to be from.

Lisa Bonsall: That's wonderful, Laurie, and so many nurses, you know, they join the boards, not for the recognition. Right? Everybody really, truly wants to make that difference. So the fact that you are, putting that out there and, you know, even just to be able to register on the NOBC website, like, yes, I'm on a board. That is recognition in and of itself, right? Just to document the work that's being done. So that's wonderful. Happy ten years. I'm very excited.

Laurie Benson: Thank you. And the best is yet to come. I just know it.

Lisa Bonsall: Okay. My last question is for the new nurses out there. What advice do you have, Laurie, for those who just are striving to make a difference?

Laurie Benson: I love this question. I try not to give advice, but here's a few things to consider. Please do not wait until it's convenient or you feel you are ready. Because we'll always have things going on in our lives. But my request would be to pause and think about what you're passionate about in the world, and then go to the next step and say, what board is associated with that? And consider being a part of that. So many nurses say to me, well, I don't know what value I could contribute. And I just want to say that there is a place for every nurse who wants to serve on a board and be that voice for populations you know so well and serve. So the skills and competencies you develop every day as a nurse, whatever you're setting, translate very naturally, and I want to emphasize very naturally, into effective board service. So you may not have considered how those competencies apply in a board setting. But, you know, boards are simply... governance is an extension of leadership applied in a board setting. So think about yourself as a leader and in a board setting, you don't have to have all the answers because you're a part of a collective body.

And that's my favorite thing about boards is being able to have those discussions and deliberations that inform better decision making. And so the nursing lens you have, by assessing the environment and listening to all perspectives before you arrive at a recommendation, or a decision is so important. That's the natural part. Listening is probably the most important skill in a boardroom. And nurses are so good at this. Working alongside others and communication skills. All of those things, really fit in with a board culture where you can thrive and do really great work in support of the mission of the organization. So what I would share is please register in our NOBC database. We'll share the QR code for you to do that because it's important that you register. So again, we can measure our collective impact if you're already serving on a board. Or if you want to serve on a board, put yourself in the mix so you'll be considered.

The third thing I would say is find yourself a mentor. Who you think highly of, that you know serves on a board and just ask them about what was your pathway, how did you get that board opportunity? What have you learned serving in in that role? And pick someone who knows you and can really appreciate, and have a conversation with you about where you might contribute and then find your own board. There aren't gonna be enough that appear on your doorstep. Go out and tell people, I say declare your interest. And when you do that, it's amazing what will come on your pathway, appear on your pathway, on the way to that goal. So stay humble personally, but be bold in service to others and remember what we're doing isn't about any one of us. The world needs each one of us to raise our voices in a way that we're going to shape strategies. We're going to shape policies, and we will improve, have the opportunity to improve health for all. So the world needs us now more than ever. What are you waiting for?

Lisa Bonsall: Laurie, Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Laurie Benson: Yes. Thank you for the opportunity. I want to express my gratitude to everyone involved in the unfolding story of the Nurses on Boards Coalition. That includes our dedicated NOBC member organizations, who make up our board of directors and actively engage in the fulfillment of our strategic plan. Our strategic partners, the state contacts, and the action coalitions all come together and find their place to catapult our work. And we have a very small staff. So I just want to give a shout out to all those who have said yes when they've had the opportunity to join us on this journey. And, you know, any nurse that I've ever talked to that served on a board says they get more than they give. And so, you know, it's just such a special day when a nurse gets selected to serve on a board. It's always my favorite. I jump out of my chair and say, yes, because, together we're making a difference. But my gratitude to nurses and the profession where you serve others every day. And thank you for that inspiration as we work together to improve health for all.

Lisa Bonsall: Thank you. Laurie.

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