Chapter 6  Traditional Attitudes and Socialisation

In previous chapters, I have tried to clarify how nursing’s apparent failure to produce effective leaders in sufficient quantities is a product of its social and political history. Hempstead (1992) claims that nurses are prisoners of their own past – steeped in tradition, comfortable in hierarchical structures and comfortable with management in a conventional, controlled environment. In the past, matrons exercised their power through their medical colleagues, consensus management in the 1970s meant that risk-taking was uncommon, and layers of functional management tiers meant that responsibility could be avoided relatively easily.

Because of the profession’s dependence upon functional structures (nurses managing nurses), leading to the confusion of management of the service with leadership (MacPherson 1991), nurses were simply not demonstrating the right skills or attitudes to make an impact after the implementation of the Griffiths recommendations in the 1980s.

Robinson and Strong (1987) and Strong and Robinson (1988) began to draw attention to the disastrous effect that this was having upon nursing. They reported that many nurses left the service in the mid to late 1980s because they simply could not face the dismissive attitudes and marginalisation that general management often brought. In addition to this, traditional nursing education and years of socialisation into the service made it difficult for them to accept accountability to anyone other than another professional. The gulf between nurses and managers was rapidly widening and would set a pattern of hostility for the future that is both negative and harmful. Clinical nurses, who had felt alienated from their own nurse managers since the Salmon structure reforms in...
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the 1960s, were largely unsympathetic. In fact, many may have been pleased to see layers of perceived ineffectual nurse managers disappear. They saw it as an opportunity to get these people off their backs. Titles and positions had provided a veneer of leadership to people who really possessed few of the necessary skills once they were forced out from behind the cover of their positional authority (Hunt 1992).

Equally frustrating was the apparent naiveté concerning the input that was required to address these problems and to develop new kinds of leader for the future. Robinson, quoted in Davidson and Cole (1991), says with exasperation, ‘a number of nurses are spotted as potential leaders at ward level, but people don’t seem to realise the investment that has to be made in such a promotion – both in terms of education and in the preparedness to stand up and be counted. My hunch is that the best either have to capitulate to the status quo or find they are so unpopular with colleagues they have to get out.’ This sums up very well what remains a persistent tension in nursing – that of bemoaning the lack of leadership while denigrating or disparaging those who are trying to provide it because their actions often challenge existing ways of thinking and working. Without the support of their own kind, from subordinates and peers, nurses had little chance of enlisting support from general managers.

By 1991 the principle of general management was well established, and there were few general managers with a nursing background (Davidson and Cole 1991). This has improved considerably at middle management levels as organisations have realised the benefits of having someone in charge who knows the business inside out, but numbers appear to remain small at the most senior levels of organisations. For example, information on the exact number of chief executives in England with a nursing qualification proved to be elusive.

In the early 1990s, nursing felt increasingly powerless and was becoming internally divided and therefore less able to give the kind of broad-based, positive support that emerging, stronger leaders needed (Hempstead 1992). A vicious circle seemed to be appearing: unless it could provide strong leaders, nursing would remain powerless and divided; as long as it felt powerless and divided it was unable to support strong leaders.