

# Driving from the Passenger Seat

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**W**hy is it that it takes the big events to capture our attention? Many times, similar events go on daily, just not on the grand scale, and we never pay attention to the impact they may have. The example I would cite is the recorded deadliest plane crash in history, the Tenerife Airport Disaster of 1977. Although the experts have come up with an exhaustive list of possible contributing factors, the one variable that stands out for me is the role of the copilot. What if the second in command understood the value of their position in the passenger seat and voiced their concern to the captain? Would the course of this event be altered? My story is not unique, but the message is.



I became a nurse in 1988 and set out to change the world. Throughout my career, my bosses knew they could count on me for anything and were not intimidated by my style or success. I quickly came to realize that number two was actually a great place to be. I began to get noticed for my passion, hard work, and determination, and my career went from the bedside to the boardroom in a matter of 20 years. I was second in command of the nursing department at a large hospital and had a nice working relationship with not only senior administration, but my nursing peers. I was at the top of my game. I had work-life balance mastered, was excellent at what I did, could handle almost any challenge head on and walk away not having waivered, and my colleagues looked to me for advice and direction.

And then it happened. The chief nursing officer (CNO) and the hospital had decided to go their separate ways. Although I was viewed within the nursing department as the “heir apparent,” I didn’t think the timing was right. Because the lifespan of the typical CNO is about 5–7 years, at only 40 years of age, I didn’t want to have to make another career change so soon. In addition, questions such as “what do you do after being CNO” weighed on my mind, but I was committed to doing whatever was asked of me. And let’s be honest, in my mind there was no “number two” better than I was. I had the authority without the responsibility, so to speak. Then the appointment I had been waiting for came. I was asked to meet with the chief executive officer (CEO). I had played the scene over and over in my mind, but hadn’t considered what was about to transpire. What I

had thought was so obvious to everyone was in fact not the case. When asked by the CEO "what should I do with the nursing department?" my immediate reply was "give it to me to lead." I almost swallowed my tongue when he looked me straight in the eyes and with all sincerity said, "I hadn't even considered you."

I have to believe that this was one of the moments in life that can only be captured accurately through cinematography because everything going through my mind and on my face can't be put into words. After all, I was number two, and everyone knows that number two is just a place holder until you become number one. Aren't we taught from an early age to "be all that you can be" and "go for the gold"? Anything other than first place is not acceptable. So how can it be that the CEO hadn't even considered me? My performance appraisals were stellar, and my salary grew by 100% (yes, 100%!) in 9 years, but I was not the choice?

Two weeks later, two decisions were made. The organization chose another CNO, and I chose to leave. For the first time in my life, I could not believe that hard work and determination meant nothing. How could it be that what was so obvious to so many who actually felt the affects of my labor was completely unknown to the people that should have known it? I was angry because originally I didn't even want the position, but not being offered the position was offensive. I needed time to regroup and reevaluate my priorities. This is when it became crystal clear.

I always prided myself on having a team-oriented philosophy. For example, the shifts where you had great staffing, but a tyrant charge nurse, were awful, but those where you were "short staffed" but pulled together and got the job done always felt so good. Consciously, I knew that it is never one person that makes the difference—it's the team. Reflecting on the work I had done for the organization I just left, I knew the value of my presence should be my take-away message. There is only so much room at the top, and the critical role that nursing leaders play is underacknowledged. It was time to accept the fact that I was a great number two and to start working on expanding my influence sideways and out.

I completely stepped out of my comfort zone and went to work at an outpatient oncology treatment center as the director of nursing. Although it was a much smaller organization, I quickly found my focus and got to work. Six months after my arrival, I was offered a promotion to the director of operations for the entire center. I declined and chose to stay in my current role, the "number two" spot. I firmly believe that everything happens for a reason. But I couldn't help but continue to spend a great deal of time reflecting on my previous job and where I may have failed and how I ended up in my current position. In the end, what I have found goes back to the beginning of this story and my journey. Why is it that it takes the big events to capture our attention? Our society clearly promotes the image that being number two at anything is considered second best. No one ever remembers the silver medalists or the runner-ups; only the winner stays in the minds of the many spectators. Often times, if you

come in second place, you are viewed as not trying hard enough, not being bright enough, and going down without a fight. Let's be honest, even being the second child in a family holds a different connotation. Now imagine that being number two is all you really ever want to be, and you have no grand aspirations of ever being the vice president, CNO, or CEO of your organization. Then you must really be a loser. But are you really?

What I learned is that being the second in command is actually not a losing spot at all. In fact, quite the contrary, the influence and support that middle managers provide their organizations is invaluable. Leveraged correctly, they actually have the potential to be far more influential than anyone on the hierarchical steps above them. To drive from the passenger seat requires knowledge, skill, determination, and most importantly, a strong sense of the direction you're headed. What I'm willing to share from my 20-year career is that perfecting the art of being number two is a skill set all of its own, and the beautiful thing about it is that you are a priceless resource that becomes invaluable to your organization. Finding individual resources committed to organizational success, while leaving their ego at the door, is a vanishing trend in this day and age. Generational differences, changes in the workforce, and the economy in general have made it a competitive environment where the fight to be noticed and be number one exists. Those of us who are completely satisfied with being the second in command have little need for individual recognition but strive to have more actual organization impact. It can be crippling to businesses when there is a shift in middle management. It can be the worst tragedy recorded in history when the number two sits back and doesn't intervene. I believe now is the time to shine the light on this invaluable asset and not only acknowledge, but begin to perfect the art of being "number two."<sup>1</sup>

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