Heather-Jane Sears draws analogies from the behaviour patterns of geese

At the original launch of the RCN Executive Nurses Forum, I had the pleasure of listening to Rennie Fritchie, then chairwoman of the South and West Regional Health Authority speak. During her presentation, Rennie adapted this delightful ‘lesson’ from the work of Doctor Angeles Arrien, based on the research by Milton Olson, and I have in turn adapted it to reflect some of the lessons I have learned as an executive nurse.

Fact number one
As each goose flaps its wings it creates an uplift for the bird following, by flying in a ‘V’ formation, the whole flock has 71 per cent greater flying range, than if the bird flew alone.

Lesson to be learned
Many of us recognise that there is a lot that we can do by ourselves, a lot we can do with colleagues and partners, but the power of what we can get done together as a team or network is quantitatively huge. People who share a common direction and sense of community, can get where they are going quicker and easier because they are travelling on the thrust of one another.

This is certainly true for nurse managers, who often find themselves in isolated leadership positions, ill prepared for demanding new roles and ever increasing challenges. Nurse managers have been slow to recognise the importance of networking and sharing with colleagues for a whole host of reasons. These range from simply finding it difficult, to making the time or finding the energy, given the pressure of work.

Some people have expressed a certain insecurity, feeling vulnerable when seen to express the perceived weakness of needing to share with colleagues and possibly ask for their advice and support.

Another factor, which I don’t believe has helped the situation, is the competitive nature of the ‘internal market’. There has certainly been a feeling of reluctance about sharing information which may lead to competitive advantage.

In the old days, we used to just ring each other and exchange information on a wide range of issues, such as current staffing levels, skillmix, sickness/absence, turnover rates, policies and new innovations. It would be naive to think that one was still able to do this as freely, but we should be developing wider networks to share work with colleagues further afield.

Fact number two
Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone, and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front.

Lesson to be learned
If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in formation with those who are heading where we want to go and be willing to accept their help, as well as give ours to others who are looking for support. How often are our good intentions to support other colleagues put into action? We may meet people at conferences and discuss how ‘so and so is having a hard time at X Trust’ or how someone ‘has been off sick again’, or worse still ‘has been marginalised, or made redundant’.

It may simply be that we know someone who has been in the thick of some bad publicity or media attention. Think how supported we would feel if someone took the trouble to give us a call or send a supportive card just to say that they were thinking of us and could they do anything to help. Although we are all individuals, with differing approaches to developing the professions and patient care, I do believe we are all headed in the same direction and could draw great strength from each other, if we would only stick together, and fight for the single cause of improving care.

Fact number three
When the lead goose gets tired it rotates...
Lesson to be learned

If we have as much sense as geese, we too will stand by each other in difficult times as well as when we are strong. This really echoes the second lesson, when taken in the context of supporting others in similar positions across different organisations. However, to me it struck a stronger chord between clinical leaders within a single organisation. The 'difficult times' are often caused by financial restraint, when everyone is fighting for the same diminishing pot of resource. This stressful situation is all too common, and can destroy what was once a supportive team.

Fact number four

This simple analogy of the lessons learned from geese really struck a chord. It reminded me not to take teamwork or leadership for granted, but rather to reflect on how both can help to support each other, develop new talent and concentrate on our overall aim of improving patient care.