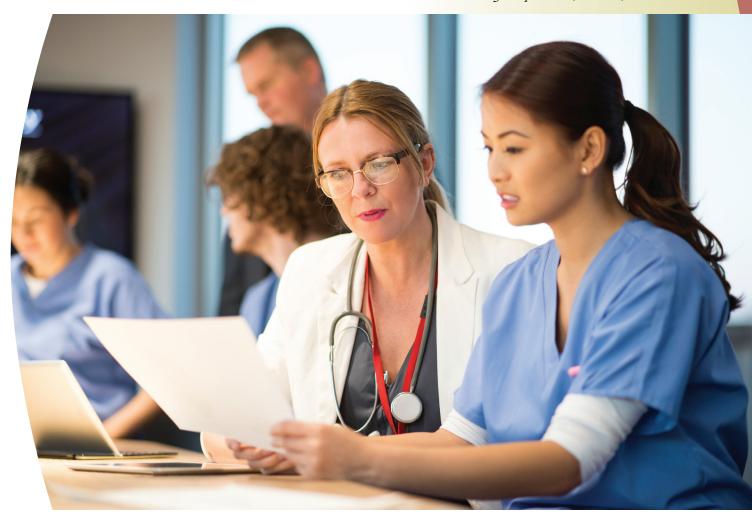# Communication and Coaching:
Keys to Developing Future Nurse Leaders

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W hen a staff nurse becomes a manager or director, it is the result of a combination of clinical excellence, education, and leadership qualities inherent or developed within the individual. He or she typically has a number of years' experience on the unit and within the organization; they know the ins and outs and are respected by their peers.

However, the majority of nursing leaders I've known admit their first management positions were not planned. They were excellent clinicians; therefore, it was assumed they would make excellent managers.

The pathway to nursing leadership varies for each individual. As I conversed with nurses I've worked with about their paths to leadership, there was 1 theme that resonated: orientation to the business activities of the unit and leadership skills required to run a nursing unit did not occur. Even when these new nurse managers had completed a BSN and/or MSN program, they commented that these programs by and large do not offer any or enough curriculum focused on teaching new nursing leaders how to most effectively and efficiently run their business, i.e., their unit.

You've all heard the saying, "People don't leave their organizations, they leave their managers." A frontline nursing leader contributes the greatest influence on a nurse's level of satisfaction and retention; therefore, the need to provide leadership development training to the frontline manager becomes imperative.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

There are many paths to leadership development. Some health care organizations provide their own training programs. AONE has an Emerging Nurse Leader Institute coupled with a certification program for the Certified Nurse Manager Leader.[1] No matter the path, the outcomes should be the same: provide the nursing leader with the knowledge and skills that will ultimately lead to improved nursing satisfaction and retention, patient outcomes, as well as improved financial results.

Part of that knowledge entails helping nurse managers to develop financial acumen, an understanding of analytics, and a mastery of staffing strategies. It's vitally important for the nurse manager to have a good understanding of the role they play with regard to labor management. They are the individuals responsible for the day-to-day activities of the nursing unit and ultimately responsible for ensuring staffing and productivity targets are met.

Nurses are wonderfully adept at mastering the art and science of patient care, but there is a vital need to understand the complexities of staffing as well. Health care organizations have spent countless dollars on new technologies to drive financial outcomes, but they often have not implemented the necessary tools and training to support evidence-based decision making relative to staffing.

Some examples of staffing strategies managers must be fluent in include balancing schedules to demand patterns; consistently applying policies that affect staff such as floating, cancellations, etc.; daily examination of metrics on things such as full-time equivalent (FTE) leakage and incidental worked time, trusting those numbers, and taking immediate action to correct instances. In tandem with these strategies, there are technology pieces that managers must make part of their daily life. And on top of all of this, there are the basic managerial skills nurse managers must have relative to keeping staff motivated and focused, and ensuring they feel cared about as human beings.

CROSS-DEPARTMENT TEAM BUILDING

Going beyond the conversations about tools and software, key to educating and then empowering nurse managers has to do with relationship building across departments, especially between nursing and finance. Health care organizations can no longer afford to have siloed departments. There must be transparency between finance and nursing—both related to goals and strategies/tools needed to achieve them.

This team building can happen organically, but to ensure it is effective and repeatable, it should be part of a leadership training program, which means that human resources (HR) should be involved as well. To establish an effective nursing leadership business training program, the first step is to embed and facilitate a culture of collaboration and mentorship. Depending upon the current state of the organization, this can be started by a shared team-building session that would include HR, nursing, and finance, in which executive leadership, or whomever appropriate, sets the stage and reminds the team of the company mission/vision.

Once all team members have a shared vision for the mission and goals, the next step is to develop a cross-collaborative process to help engage all parties in identifying where current knowledge gaps exist across areas. This does not need to happen to the extent in which nursing learns GAAPs (Generally Accepted Accounting Principles) or finance learns how to start an IV, but enough to understand what it is like to be in each other's shoes.

Building positive relationships between finance and the nurse leader is imperative. In most organizations, there is divide between the 2 groups. Generally, that divide is caused by data. Finance has their data, and nursing has their data. Often these 2 sources of data do not agree. The data from nursing might point to the need to increase FTEs in a department. The data from finance might show that department does not have a need. This back and forth can be eliminated by providing access to the same data for all parties. There is no need to have data coming from different sources. It creates confusion and tension. Sharing data provides a single version of the truth—a common point from which both groups can work.

An even more common case in this scenario is that nursing does not have the data to prove their need, but instead rely on their intuition and experience. They know they are short, but do not have the data to prove it. Part of the reason for this is that too many nursing departments are still hanging on to their paper and pencils. When staffing situations are documented on paper and tossed in the file cabinet, finance is missing out on access to valuable data. Nurses are hanging onto the paper because they don't trust the data or the information finance is telling them. Engaging the new nurse manager with the finance team will help build that level of trust, and the relationship will result in positive open dialogue around financial opportunities as well as a better understanding of how to build and sustain productive staffing grids. It will be a win–win for finance, the nurse manager, and the organization.

IDENTIFYING AREAS OF FRUSTRATION

Nurses of recent have voiced a concern with feeling a lack of respect and authority. The number of registered nurses (RNs)