

Creating a Culture of Accountability Through Obligations of Membership

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OUR STORY

It has been said that if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there. A clearly articulated vision of a professional nursing organization has guided our developmental journey for over 20 years, ensuring that we knew, not only where we were going, but also the specific strategies that would get us there. An overarching statement captured our intent:

Professional nurses practice within a highly developed, well-coordinated nursing organization that consistently achieves and sustains top-tier outcomes and is well prepared to support the priorities of the organization and the system, while advancing and contributing to the profession.

Major elements were identified and, within each of these elements, there were often multiple, significant initiatives that would form our building blocks and keep propelling us toward the realization of our vision over a number of years. [Table 1](#) illustrates the essential elements of our vision.

Our professional nursing organization evolved over the years through a disciplined and systematic approach, always in pursuit of the next developmental step. With our vision as a guiding framework, a specific strategic plan was developed by our nursing coordinating council each year, driven by both the strategic priorities of our system and hospital, and also by our position on a developmental continuum.

Over a period of more than 20 years, our shared governance model matured, resulting in direct care nurse ownership of practice and meaningful voice within the organization. We were designated a Magnet[®] organization in 2002, and subsequently were redesignated 2 more times. We produced excellent clinical outcomes and patient satisfaction that was sustained at greater than the 90th percentile; and we worked with highly engaged nurses and other clinical professionals. We consistently demonstrated operational excellence and did so without ever using a single agency nurse, mandating overtime, or paying sign-on bonuses.

We placed significant emphasis on our higher-level professional aspirations as well. We set goals for specialty certification, published our work, and presented at national meetings. Upon release of the Institute of Medicine's report on the *Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, we immediately embraced the goal of 80% bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) by 2020 and partnered with our Foundation to create a \$1 million endowment for nursing degree advancement (BSN, masters, doctorate) scholarships.¹

Equally compelling were the things that were not yet accomplished. A more structured approach to our investment in continuous learning and development was needed, and we had hardly scratched the surface on determining what research should look like in a community nursing organization. The many things on our "to do" list simply reinforced

Table 1. Essential Elements of a Professional Nursing Organization

<i>Structure—shared governance</i>	• The structure through which nursing fulfills the accountabilities of the professional discipline • Decision-making authority is based on expertise; clinical decisions are made by clinicians • Resource decisions are made by managers
<i>Culture of accountability</i>	• Ownership of the work is the most significant determinant of organizational success
<i>Lifelong learning—continuous development</i>	• Advance degree and certification goals • Simulation learning • Interdisciplinary learning • Robust clinical peer review • Conduct research/apply best evidence • Leadership team development
<i>Interdisciplinary collaboration</i>	• Whole-system shared governance • Nursing/medicine leadership partnerships • Care coordination
<i>Contribution to the discipline</i>	• Research • Presentation of our work locally, nationally, internationally • Publication of our work in peer-reviewed journals • Participation in, and leadership of, professional associations

Box 1. The Four Factors that Characterize a Culture of Accountability

1. Expectations are clear.
2. Expectations are perceived to be credible and reasonable.
3. It is anticipated that positive consequences will follow performance.
4. It is anticipated that negative consequences will follow poor performance.

our understanding that we were on a continuous journey and would never “arrive.”

“OBLIGATIONS OF MEMBERSHIP”—THE NEXT DEVELOPMENTAL STEP

In 2010, as our coordinating council planned the events for our Nurses’ Week celebration, it was decided that it was time to invite our friend and colleague Tim Porter-O’Grady back to our organization. Tim had worked with us for the first 2 years of our development of shared governance and had been an invaluable resource. It was time to ask him to evaluate our progress after 20 years and give us feedback about our level of development and opportunities for improvement. In Tim’s

presentations to our nursing organization, he spoke about the maturity of our model. He complimented us on the tenacity with which we had transformed an idea into “the way we work around here.” It was evident that we had remained true to professional governance in all of our work. He went on to point out, however, that despite a mature shared governance structure, he saw clear evidence that we did not have consistency in the behavior of accountability. He reminded us that, as members of a professional nursing organization, we had been granted the privilege to practice. With that privilege came rights and obligations. He referred to these as “obligations of membership.” Tim suggested that it would be useful to invest in articulating the obligations of membership and to hold ourselves accountable to them. Thus began an 18-month journey to strengthen our culture of accountability, one of the essential elements of our vision.

THE PROCESS

It was immediately evident to our coordinating council that the articulation of the obligations associated with membership in our nursing organization would bring clarity with respect to expectations, and provide an opportunity to be equally clear about the consequences of not meeting obligations. Additionally, the “obligations” would provide a vehicle to explore cultural fit with potential new members of our organization.

We focused our learning on cultures of accountability. Jeff Grimshaw and his colleagues² described 4 factors that characterize a culture of accountability, as illustrated in [Box 1](#). They

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