



Mentorship matters: when nurses succeed, hospitals can, too

Today's hospitals and clinics have made developing and retaining effective nurses a top priority, largely in support of succession planning. As experienced nurses retire, they're called on to pass the torch to others who are ready to assume leadership positions. But the nurses who step in also need emotional support, mutual sharing, and career guidance in order to avoid burnout and thrive in these high-stress positions.

One strategy that can help nurses build their careers and increase resiliency is to create and maintain a strong mentoring culture. Mentoring provides nurses with a way to collaborate and learn new skills while also offering them ongoing support. Additionally, mentoring can foster a sense of belonging and empowerment that gives nurses the confidence to take on larger roles in developing, designing, and delivering health care.

What is mentorship?

The American Assembly for Men in Nursing defines mentoring as, "A reciprocal and collaborative learning relationship between two, sometimes more, individuals with mutual goals and shared accountability for the outcomes and success of the relationship." Most often, a mentoring relationship in nursing has meant pairing a new nurse with an established nurse who can offer knowledge, resources, and insights into a hospital's culture.



However, Bridget Roberts, associate dean of the School of Nursing and Health Sciences at Capella University, points out that, when it comes to the need for mentorship, it often doesn't matter how much experience a nurse has. "Nurses at all levels can benefit from having a mentor," Roberts says. "A nurse might move to a new specialty area and need extra support. Or maybe a nurse has worked in a particular unit for a long time and is now moving into a leadership position. That nurse could benefit from advice and guidance from someone who already made that move."

Cynthia Latney, senior vice president of Nursing Business Operations, Jefferson Health, agrees that several types of mentoring are possible for nurses. "In addition to expert-to-novice mentoring, there are also career mentors who serve as informal coaches and life mentors. A life mentor is a person a nurse can use as a sounding board. It's someone to turn to and say, 'I'm struggling with this. What do you think?'" Regardless of the type of mentorship, Latney asserts the importance of mentees feeling that they are seen, heard, and understood. "Mentorship only works if there is a general rapport and shared values between the mentee and mentor," she says. "And both sides need to benefit. It doesn't work if it feels too formal. You can't force it."

Why mentorship matters

According to Roberts, peer mentoring within hospitals and clinics was traditionally viewed as a way to make sure nurses and patients were safe and that safety protocols were followed. But ongoing mentorship can offer so much more. "Mentoring helped move nursing in a positive direction in terms of safety," she says. "But we still have a lot of work to do with nurses on resiliency and career development. I don't think we always equip our nurses to withstand the stress of the profession over time. The level of burnout can be astonishing. Mentorship—having someone to talk to—can help lower or prevent that burnout and increase retention, which ultimately reduces the cost of turnover."

Latney shares her experience using a formal mentoring program to increase retention. "In one of my former positions, I started with a 25 percent turnover rate for nurses," she says. "Right away I knew it was going to be important to develop a strong mentoring program. With a newly licensed cohort of nurses, it's not just about the 12 or 20 weeks it takes to onboard them. When mentorship takes place over time, so many important skills and practices are embedded into their professional practice."

Topics that can be addressed through mentorship include how to deal with stress, communicate with peers, and integrate into a community. "If someone who is new to nursing is also moving into a new community, it's just as important for a hospital to help them manage their lives in that new environment as it is their career or role within the hospital," Latney says. "This kind of life mentorship can improve retention and loyalty of a team. I've had many nurses tell me how valuable it is to them to feel that the organization is really paying attention to them, not just trying to keep them there."

This kind of attention and care to nurses can greatly benefit hospitals and their patients. "In a mature culture, you can feel when there is good coaching and mentoring going on," Latney affirms. "There is trust, open communication, and collaboration around care. There's a willingness to speak up and ask questions on a patient's behalf. There's no such thing as, 'That's not my patient.'"

How to promote successful mentoring at your hospital or clinic

Latney and Roberts agree that fostering mentorship takes thoughtful planning and sustained commitment. Here are some of their guidelines for creating a high-impact program:

- **Extend mentoring for new nurses beyond orientation.** When faced with a high turnover rate of nurses at a health system where she previously worked, Latney responded by helping institute a two-year residency for new nurses. The results were dramatic: “Now, the retention rate is 95 percent. The residency and the mentoring mean a lot to nurses. It’s something they’re seeking out. I ended up with more new nurses who wanted into the program than I had positions.” She noted that Jefferson Health, like many health systems, understands the importance of nurse mentorship. “We have been very successful in onboarding large groups of newly licensed nurses to fill RN vacancies and respond to the increase patient demand.”
- **Make mentoring programs available to nurses at all career levels.** According to Roberts, “nurses don’t go into a unit and stay there forever. That’s the beauty of this profession. Nurses are encouraged to try different specialties and often they like to move to different departments and units. It’s really important that we’re encouraging nurses to seek new mentors for that next level and that mentors are people who are engaged in lifelong learning. But for mentoring to work you need to be intentional. There needs to be structure and processes in place for all nurses.”
- **Select mentors who are willing to dedicate their time.** “What you want as a mentee is guidance and advice,” Roberts says. “You want to know what you are doing well and how you can improve. What are the challenges you can take on to help you further develop? Mentors need to be willing to give feedback, even if it isn’t always positive. And they need to be vulnerable in the relationship, which can mean sharing decisions they made in the past that weren’t the best decisions and how they learned from them.”
- **Track your success.** “In general, revenue for hospitals is going down while volume of patients is going up,” Latney says. “The question is always, ‘Which programs are going to stay?’ and CFOs often struggle with what nurse retention means in terms of dollars.” Latney suggests tracking outcomes, like retention rate, patient experience scores, and quality scores alongside mentorship. “Dollars put towards mentoring do have impact,” she says. “I’ve seen evidence of this throughout my career.”
- **Encourage using technology to make and keep connections.** “The good thing is that now we have technology and social media,” Roberts says. “We can connect anywhere and at hours that work for everyone. A mentorship doesn’t have to be with someone from the same facility or even the same city or state anymore. It could be with anyone you feel a connection to—maybe someone a nurse met in school or at a conference—and it could be that nurses have more than one mentor.”

The long-term effects of mentorship

Much of our future success in health care depends on creating a strong workforce that can depend on supportive, nurturing cultures and relationships. “Mentorship needs to be in the forefront,” Latney says. “The literature claims that our experienced CNOs are leaving the nursing workforce and will be retiring in the next five years. We need to have the appetite to mentor new and mid-career nurses or we won’t have leaders who are ready to replace them. I’ve now been in nursing for 30 years and it’s so rewarding to get a text or email from a nurse I mentored that says, ‘Remember when I said my goal was to be a CNO? Now here I am, doing it.’”

Roberts shares her own insights into the rewards mentoring has offered her throughout her career. “One of my mentees was a staff nurse I met while teaching a clinical group in an ICU setting,” she says. “I recommended that she pursue a career in nursing education. She went on to attain her BSN, then her MSN, and now has her DNP. I saw her last year at a conference and learned that she was the lead instructor for the senior-level nursing class at her school. She remembered the day I talked to her about becoming a nurse educator and told me I was one reason she became successful in that role. How great is that?”

