How to prepare the next generation of nursing leaders

IN LIGHT OF the predicted nursing shortage, nursing leaders need to take strategic action to prepare nurses to assume key leadership roles in the near future. Proactive succession planning programs are a key strategy for addressing the impending shortage of nurse leaders. Such planning involves identifying high-potential individuals and formally developing them to assume leadership roles. A primed pipeline of competent nurses prepared to step into leadership roles may reduce recruiting expenses, increase leadership continuity, and decrease role-transition stress.

In the healthcare arena, succession-planning practices are limited. Organizations with programs that identify and prepare future leaders typically focus on the top executive levels. A 2012 literature review recommends that leadership pipelines be primed through succession planning at all management levels. This article outlines the initial steps in getting succession planning off the ground.

Strategic planning is needed to delineate desired leadership competencies and identify future high-potential leaders. Organizational commitment is essential for identifying and developing internal talent (individuals with high leadership potential). These organizations need to be transparent about their commitment to helping nurses reach their full potential through succession planning. Nurses who feel valued and see a chance to grow within the organization are less likely to look for outside opportunities. Likewise, organizations known for identifying and developing internal talent become desired workplaces, which enhances recruitment.

A succession planning committee is a prerequisite for organizations seeking to provide leadership continuity through succession planning. The committee should begin with these three steps:

- identifying positions with high vacancy and turnover rates
- establishing role competencies
• developing methods for identifying internal talent.

**Identify critical leadership roles through analysis**

The committee first identifies leadership positions with high vacancy and turnover rates by analyzing all nursing leadership positions over the last 5 years. Committee members then identify employees currently holding these positions and note their tenure to get information on turnover rates and recruitment trends.

Next, the committee determines how these employees most often are identified or recruited for leadership roles, as well as their development and preparation before taking these positions. For example, nurse managers (often considered first-line nursing leaders) commonly are chosen based on their clinical expertise or long unit tenure. But although they’re clinical experts, nurse managers too often lack the formal education and leadership training needed for the nurse manager role. This probably explains why their turnover has been as high as 50%. To increase retention, leaders should identify and develop high-potential nurses with leadership and management experience.

**Establish role competencies**

Once the committee identifies leadership positions, it establishes specific role competencies. Clear, concise competencies are crucial for identifying high-potential leaders, and provide a framework for designing the nursing curriculum to educate and develop these individuals. Competencies provide a more objective measure for selecting future nurse managers than bedside expertise or length of time on the unit. They also provide an objective way to measure competency and performance once a nurse assumes a leadership role. The nurse manager role should have well-defined competencies in both leadership and management. A nurse identified as a high-potential candidate for development as a manager can be evaluated against those specific competencies.

After identifying competencies, the organization and nurse leaders disseminate them throughout the nursing staff. Competencies can be incorporated into the organization’s mission statement, vision, and values and embedded within leadership behavior statements or evaluations. (See **Resources for developing competencies**.)

**Develop methods for identifying internal talent**

Next, the committee uses a strategic method to identify high-potential internal talent. These individuals should be evaluated based on recognized competencies. For instance, desired leadership competencies can be included in annual reviews; nurses who score high in these behaviors and skills could be interviewed by current nursing leaders about their career trajectory. Leaders should determine these nurses’ career aspirations and find out if they desire a leadership role. Those who do are key candidates for strategic and intentional development. In contrast, an organization that develops individuals who don’t wish to be leaders is wasting time and money. (See **Succession-planning leadership program**.)

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him. (See Amazing body facts the mirror doesn’t tell you.)

The nursing reflection
Ironically, some nurses who care for sick patients and help promote health and healing are unhealthy themselves. Research shows that occupational stress, poor coping behaviors, and lack of support cause anxiety and depression in nurses. The longitudinal Nurses Health Study, which began in 1988, examines relationships among hormone replacement therapy, diet, exercise, and other lifestyle practices and chronic illnesses. It found female nurses’ health was no better than that of the general populace. Ideally, nurses’ health should mirror their knowledge about the human body, health, and illness. Unfortunately, knowledge alone doesn’t create vibrant health. We should sing along with the Disney character Mulan, who asks, “When will my reflection show who I truly am?”

As nurses, we can do better to reflect the true inner beauty of our bodies—and project that beauty in our lifestyles. Balancing the mirror’s messages is the key. What the mirror doesn’t tell you can inspire you to honor or your body. What it does tell you can motivate you to care for yourself so you can better model healthy behaviors for patients.

Fixing the mirror’s reflection
In our society of quick fixes and limited warranties, it’s easy—and often necessary—to replace just about everything. We can replace most material objects when they’re worn out. The only thing that can’t be replaced is the human body. We can misuse and abuse it, or treat it with loving care. (See Learning to love your reflection.)

Despite the wondrous advances of medical science and plastic surgery, your body is still your very essence. Although it comes with a lifetime warranty, its quality isn’t guaranteed; that’s up to you.

So what does your mirror say to you? And will you listen?

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Nursing leaders must prepare the next generation of nurses to assume key roles that help advance healthcare delivery. Doing this will take strategic planning based on the organization’s needs and desired leadership competencies. Identifying and developing high-potential nurses as leaders are the keys to starting a succession plan that provides leadership continuity and improves the workplace environment. This strategy also helps healthcare organizations reduce recruiting costs and improve retention.

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Selected references
American Association of Critical-Care Nurses. Nurse Manager Leadership Partnership. 2006. aacn.org/wd/practice/content/nursemanagerinventorytool.pcms?menu=practice

Succession-planning leadership program
To identify high-potential candidates for leadership roles, organizations can develop a succession-planning leadership program for nurses who meet minimum requirements. Applicants would be evaluated to determine if they meet set criteria. For example, all nurses with bachelor’s degrees in nursing who are eligible for leadership positions would apply to a 6- or 12-month program designed to assess and improve their leadership behaviors and management skills. Criteria might include tenure, formal education, current and past leadership roles, and personal career vision. This program would allow nurses to design a personal development plan based on their needs, while offering structured leadership content through monthly workshops supported by experiential learning activities.

To promote personal and professional development, nurses in the leadership program should be mentored and coached. Those who successfully complete the program would enter a pool of individuals prepared to assume leadership roles as they become available.

What the mirror doesn’t tell you about your magnificent self is far more interesting than what you may glimpse in your reflection.