



6 Skills for DONs of the Future

DONs are at the heart of the long-term care team. More than ever, they have to juggle many issues that consume their days and often keep them up at night. While the changing role of the DON was influenced by the pandemic, the shifting responsibilities of the nurse leader goes beyond COVID, especially in light of the growing trend toward a more holistic approach to care and operations.

Cindy Fronning, RN-BC, IP-BC, AS-BC, RAC-CT, CDONA, FACDONA, EFLA, NADONA Director of Education, shares six skills the DON of the future will need:

➤ **1. Flexibility.** “DONs coming in will need to know how to ride the waves and be flexible and resilient,” Fronning says. “This means asking questions before they get hired. They need to understand and set expectations up front.”

Once they understand expectations they can identify resources, such as the consultant pharmacist for education and tools on infection prevention/control, antibiotic stewardship, drug distribution, and so on. At the same time, the administrator can be a resource on issues such as budgets, ROI reports, revenue/expense reports, and supply ordering/storage.

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➤ **2. Data savviness.** “Data is the future, and so much depends on it,” says Fronning. “Yet many DONs don’t know how to get started with all the data they get or how to assess its value. It can be challenging because it’s coming at them from all sources, but we need to help them understand how to analyze and interpret data and how to use it for effective quality improvement.”

➤ **3. Ability to work with prescribers and pharmacists on deprescribing.** Particularly during the pandemic, DONs often found themselves in the halls working the medication carts. Medication administration, while essential, is time-consuming and requires significant attention to detail. Working with prescribers and pharmacists on ways to reduce the number of medications residents are taking, cutting down on dosages, and eliminating unnecessary supplements and vitamins can all save time and free DONs and their teams to provide direct resident care – the work they truly love.

Fronning says, “Do you have to give every medication and/or vitamin in the morning if it’s administered once daily? Not really, they can be spread out to make the medication passes shorter and more manageable. The DON needs to recognize those kinds of changes to make the medication administration as efficient and practical as possible.”

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> 4. Knowing the DON can't do everything.

"Administrators can be supportive of the DON and help them problem solve, instead of just expecting them to do everything such as filling shifts. We have to be a strong team together instead of the DON putting in long hours to do it all," says Fronning.

Other team leaders can help as well. For instance, the pharmacist can help with medication room checks and audits, as well as education on a variety of issues (through sources such as Illuminate). Fronning stresses, "The key is to get the DON off the floor doing work that others can do."

For instance, she suggests, "Someone else can be put in charge of resident testing, giving vaccines, and recording vaccination-related data. Taking those time-consuming tasks off the plate of DONs should be a priority."

> 5. Communication/soft skills. Fronning observes,

"Good nurses may not be good leaders, partly because they have never been taught how. NADONA has a leadership prep course, and there are other opportunities to gain skills like listening, conflict resolution, and empathy."

> 6. Preparedness.

"The DON has to be involved in developing the emergency preparedness plan, and this needs to go beyond environmental disasters. They need to be involved in planning for staffing crises as well. They must have a plan B and plan C and the ability to look ahead," Fronning suggests. This means, for instance, determining how much staff they'll need for each level of census/occupancy and varying levels of acuity.

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What will the DON of the future look like?

Fronning says, "This person would be compassionate. They would know their staff because they don't sit in their office at their desk. They would encourage and engage people by empowering them and giving them opportunities to grow."

She adds, "The nurse leader of the future can't be afraid of those around them, that people may know more than they do, or be afraid to share information with others; instead, they need to surround themselves with the best possible people and keep them informed. Staff want transparency; they need to know that they are important enough to be informed."

They need to understand that we are a 'careforce,' not a 'workforce.' If we bear this in mind, we can build a culture that entices people to come to this setting and stay here."

PharMerica is partnering with leading organizations to support DONs and other nurse leaders in long-term and post-acute care with needed resources and education. Access more at PharMerica.com/who-we-are/nurse-advancement.