



How to Make the Nurse Manager Role a Perfect Fit

Just because someone is an excellent nurse doesn't mean they will be a great leader. While nurses learn much in nursing school, they seldom – if ever – learn how to be good managers. As Gwen Wilburn, MBA, RN-BC, senior vice president of clinical operations at The Aspenwood Company in Houston, TX, and AALNA board member and president of the TX chapter, said, "Someone may be a great floor nurse and very task oriented. But a manager has to be more forward thinking and see the bigger picture."

Checks and Tips for Top Nurse Managers

The following is a checklist of key skills for nurse managers and some tips on how to nurture them for those new in the role:

- 1. Communication.** Effective nurse managers are good communicators. They act as role models and foster a positive work environment. They don't just sit at their desks all day. Instead, they take the time to walk around, talk to people, and observe what is happening in the building. They keep their finger on the pulse of morale, resident satisfaction, and evolving problems or concerns. Wilburn suggested, "You have to know your audience and the people you're leading. It's easy to get distracted, but you need to focus on what people are saying and really hear what they're trying to tell you."

Tip: Consider role-playing exercise for things like conflict resolution, performance reviews, and the introduction of a new process or system. This can help identify skill gaps that can be addressed and give the nurse manager greater confidence in their ability to interact effectively with staff, residents/families, and others.

- 2. Human resources expertise.** "This is a pretty big piece of the manager job. Nurse managers need to know how to conduct job interviews and what elements need to be included in onboarding, among other things," Wilburn said. Nurse managers should partner with HR to work together on issues such as recruitment and retention, training, employee safety, and scheduling.

Tip: Have the new nurse manager and HR leader sit down together and go over top issues the nurse needs to know about. Then consider monthly meetings between the two for updates and questions.

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- 3. Leadership.** “Nurse managers need to know how to set expectations and get and give respect,” said Wilburn, adding, “It can be challenging to go from being colleague to boss. It calls for a different mindset.”

Tip: Have new nurse managers complete a leadership training program. For instance, AALNA has partnered with HIGN to offer a comprehensive leadership series to its members. Course topics include strategies for effective leadership, managing in times of crisis, creating a culture of respect and high performance, and shared decision making.

- 4. Technology.** “Nurse managers need to know at least some basics of the technology being used in their buildings,” said Wilburn. They need to know what programs, software, systems, and devices their teams are using and how they’re using them. They also should undergo extensive training on cybersecurity.

Tip: Have nurse managers meet with IT team members and/or vendors to go over the basics of the technology being used, security features, and other information. Make sure they know who to contact if there are problems or issues with technology and what they should do if systems go down for any reason.

- 5. Change management.** “We live in a changing world, and change is inevitable,” said Wilburn. Nurse managers need to understand the “why” behind change and not lose sight of this. “They need to be able to communicate this to their teams and help them understand how change will impact them. They should be able to help people visualize the benefits of change and why they should get on board,” she said.

Tip: Make sure nurse leaders are involved in conversations about and plans for change. Get all leaders on board and offer messaging they can share with their teams so everyone is on the same page and using the same language.

Ensuring Win-Win Opportunities

“You may have some individuals who can step in as managers and get up to speed quickly. Others may need more time or some additional training or support,” said Wilburn, adding, “At any rate, we need to enable them to pose questions, ask for help, and request additional skills training, or education.” She further stressed, “The nurse leaders need to know that facility leaders and others want them to succeed and are there to support them.”

You don’t have to lose a good nurse if a management position turns out not to be the right fit for someone. “Talk about their strengths and weaknesses and give them an opportunity to fine-tune those things. Ask about their professional goals and what aspects of work they’re passionate about,” suggested Wilburn. You might be able to take some things off their plate to make their work more manageable or it might be possible to move them into another role or create a new position.