

# Be a coach for novice nurses

When you coach rookie nurses, everyone wins.

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, CNAA, and Susan Dyess, MSN, RN



**EVERY YEAR, THOUSANDS** of new nurses enter practice with enthusiasm and a passion for their profession. So what happens? Researchers tell us that during their first year, 30% of new nurses leave their first nursing job. By the end of two years, 57% leave.

No one can supply a complete explanation of these staggering numbers. But anyone who has been a new nurse probably has an intuitive answer. Remember your first year as a nurse? Well, consider this: The transition from the educational setting to the practice setting is more difficult today.

Many new nurses report feeling completely overwhelmed by the challenge of learning the job in the face of abbreviated orientations, staffing shortages, high patient acuity, short lengths of stay, and high expectations from staff and patients.

How can you, as an experienced nurse, help? Be a nurse-coach. That doesn't mean you have to become a preceptor—although that's a good idea, too. Being a coach can mean sharing ideas, discussing challenges, developing knowledge, building resources, facilitating technical and intellectual skill competencies, and improving morale in your practice setting.

## Giving the right signals

Nurse-coaches work in all practice settings and with nurses at various levels of competence. From novices to experts, we can all learn from good coaching, but coaching is particularly important for novice nurses.

Many nurses classify themselves as experts. (See *Developing from a novice to an expert*.) If you're an expert, you probably don't rely on theory, practice guidelines, or procedures to perform your interventions. You have an enormous background of experience and an intuitive grasp of each situation, and you operate with a genuine understanding of the total situation.

Most new graduates that you coach will need careful, step-by-step explanations of your actions and thought processes to understand the clinical decision making that seems obvious and natural to you. When coaching novice nurses, share recollections of your own valuable nursing experience. Recount the situations, the actions you took, and the outcomes. This case-based coaching style helps the beginner gain insight from your experience.

## Developing from a novice to an expert

This flowchart shows the progression of a nurse's development, based on Benner's model in *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice*.

### 1. Novice

- No experience
- Follows rules based upon book knowledge
- May appear highly task-focused; doesn't anticipate

### 2. Advanced beginner

- Acceptable performance
- Responds to experiential recognition of situations
- Principles guide actions; may consider future possibilities

### 3. Competent

- Mastery of clinical skills
- Manages various patient situations in same setting
- Conscious, deliberate, and thorough actions

### 4. Proficient

- Speed and mastery of clinical skills
- Guided by maxims
- Perceives holistic nature and responds

### 5. Expert

- Flexible and highly capable with all aspects of clinical skills
- Deep understanding of total situation
- Intuitive grasp of situations; able to quickly modify responses

As a coach, you can help a less-experienced nurse achieve his or her goals, using encouragement, guidance, and modeling. Good coaching often takes the form of simple actions and expressions of support.

## Ten winning strategies for coaches

These strategies come from the best source of all—novice nurses.

- Acknowledge the skill level of the novice.
- Encourage questions.
- Give direct feedback in private.
- Convey a love of coaching.
- Respect individual style.
- Push novices out of their comfort zone.
- Support complex skill acquisition.
- Build self-confidence through positive feedback.
- Foster a trusting relationship.
- Demonstrate strong organizational skills.

### Winners and losers

We invited our novice nurses to tell us what they believe makes a winning coach. And they provided some compelling ideas about strategies that work when coaching novice nurses. (See *Ten winning strategies for coaches*.)

According to our novice nurses, winning coaches:

- are humble and instill confidence in novices by promoting a sense of trust.
- enable professional and clinical competency in a safe and positive manner.
- foster development by encouraging novices to develop their individual paths to caring.
- support novices to reach their potential by encouraging critical thinking and prioritization.

Our novices told us that losing coaches:

- are rigid and intolerant.
- provide disorganized nursing care.
- cross-examine novices and provide critical, not constructive, feedback.
- violate confidentiality.
- demand speedy nursing care.

### Know your novices

When you coach novice nurses, take generational differences into account. Remember, today's workforce has four different generations: Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X'ers, and the Millennial generation. Most novice nurses are part of Generation X (born between 1960 and 1980) or the Millennial generation (born between 1980 and 2000). So you may well find yourself coaching a novice nurse with very different attitudes, beliefs, work habits, and experiences than your own. The keys to success are to respect generational diversity and support the needs of the individual novice nurse.

Researchers tell us that Generation X'ers prefer a coaching environment that allows them opportunities to demonstrate their expertise. They don't want to feel micromanaged. They do want to be empowered in the

work setting and to be asked for their feedback.

Millennial nurses expect more coaching and mentoring than any other generation in the workforce. They are optimistic and goal-oriented but also want structure, guidance, and extensive orientation. They value internships, formalized clinical coaching, and mentoring programs. In fact, if Millennial nurses don't receive good coaching from their co-workers, they are more likely to leave an organization than previous generations.

### Creating a winning environment

A winning environment starts with a commitment to coaching. A novice nurse may have a designated preceptor, but coaching should be everyone's duty. Nurse leaders should support a nurturing culture that promotes coaching. One way to do this is by recognizing and rewarding the invaluable work coaches do.

Remember, coaching is a learned skill. Not all great nurses make great coaches. Our leaders also need to provide training and guidance for coaches.

No matter how much knowledge and training you may have, to be a coach, you must want to be a coach. If your heart isn't in coaching, a novice will sense it.

One more thing: Coaching is a two-way street. Novices, too, contribute to the success of the coaching relationship by valuing their coach's practice knowledge and by asking questions. Maintaining mutual respect and open communication helps to build a winning coaching environment.

### Natural coaches

When you think about it, most nurses are natural coaches. We coach our patients and their families all the time. And coaching our novice nurses is not only our responsibility but also part of our caring legacy. In truth, our contributions as coaches to future generations of nurses may have a longer, more profound effect than anything else we do as nurses. ★

### Selected references

Benner P. *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice*. Menlo Park, Calif.: Addison-Wesley; 1984:13-34.

Bowles C, Candela L. First job experiences of recent RN graduates. *J Nurs Admin*. 2005;35(3):130-137.

Cantrell MA. The impact of a nurse externship program on the transition process from graduate to registered nurse. *J Nurs Staff Dev*. 2005; 21(5):187-195.

Sherman R. Leading a multigenerational workforce: issues, challenges and strategies. Available at: [http://www.nursingworld.org/ojin/topic30/tpc30\\_2.htm](http://www.nursingworld.org/ojin/topic30/tpc30_2.htm). Accessed March 14, 2007.

For a complete list of selected references, visit [www.AmericanNurseToday.com](http://www.AmericanNurseToday.com).

Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, CNA, is Director, Nursing Leadership Institute at Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing, Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. Susan Dyess, MSN, RN, is Project Director, Novice Nurse Leadership Initiative at Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing, Florida Atlantic University.