MAGNET® JOURNEY FOCUSES on nurse staffing and workforce development that demonstrates the structures and processes that serve to give a “voice” to nurses as part of shared decision making. A key component in understanding how nurses give voice to their work is thinking about how nurses actually describe their work to others. What is the style and substance of how nurses’ communication facilitates or deters the listener(s) in seeking more information and/or elaboration about their individual work or the work of the profession? As the Magnet visit became a reality, the nursing vice presidents of the three acute care hospitals involved voiced concerns regarding how the nurses may not be prepared for the visit. They believed the nursing staff were not comfortable talking to reviewers about the details and substance of their work. The CNO listened, gathered information, and facilitated the development of an action plan to foster better communication to detail the impact and value of nursing in the organization.

A dynamic collegial partnership was forged with the senior vice president for marketing and communications at Main Line Health, Bryn Mawr, PA. She focused on how to present nursing work and outcomes to a wide variety of audiences. Her experience in communications, coupled with a long-standing association with a nationally recognized expert in this field, helped prepare the nurse workforce. Although the focus and impetus at the time was preparing the nursing staff for the upcoming Magnet visit, the lessons learned through this experience may be applied to nurses in any setting. It can be part of the overall development of the workforce, independent of an event such as a Magnet visit. The aim of this article is to describe how a “communications makeover” through an intense day of education and coaching transformed the nursing staff into effective communicators.

The nursing workforce must be able to communicate with confidence and ease their contributions and value to patients, co-workers, and the community at large. When thinking about nurses’ communication, collaboration, credibility, compassion, and coordination have been identified as skill sets that exemplify nurse professionalism to members of health teams (Apker, Propp, Ford, & Hofmesiter, 2006). And with more emphasis on communication as it relates to overall quality and cost, the role that nurses play is pivotal (Agarwal, Sands, & Schneider, 2010).

A daylong, intensive communication training with selected Main Line Health staff provided an opportunity for nurses to gain tips, techniques, and skills in how to communicate effectively in the workplace. Nurses need specific tools to convey their mission and be influencers. They must be encouraged to discuss their role, the value of their work, and the difference it makes to patients, families, and the community.

NANCY M. VALENTINE, PhD, MPH, RN, FAAN, FNAP, is Principal, Valentine Group Health, Philadelphia, PA; Nurse Researcher, Lankenau Institute for Medical Research, Wynnewood, PA; and Adjunct Associate Professor, University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, Philadelphia, PA.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: The author wishes to thank Sarah Peterson, former SVP for Marketing and Communications, for her guidance in program organization, and Merrie Spaeth, Spaeth Communications, Inc., for her consultation, training, and staff assistance in the preparation of this article.

Giving Voice to Communicating Values, Beliefs, and Contributions

Although nurses were rated top of all professionals for honesty and ethics for the 11th year (Jones, 2011), there is generally not a clear understanding among the public and even among many health pro-

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Effective communication is essential as nurses convey their critical impact in care delivery.
- As part of Magnet readiness, the Main Line Health System engaged a nationally recognized expert to develop a communications strategy for staff nurses and frontline managers.
- This initiative was driven by the chief nursing officer and the nursing leadership team.
- The goal was to refine communication skills of the nursing staff to tell their story of the Magnet work achieved as well as to better prepare staff to clearly articulate the essential elements of their work in all settings.
- The result was clinical nurses who were able to articulate their unique value in a changing health care world clearly.
professionals and health care administrators as to the pivotal role nurses play in delivering superior care. Often nurses are referred to as the “glue” that holds health care together because they are physically present 24/7. With “glue” being a nebulous description, much of the expert knowledge, science, and skill that nurses utilize every day often gets lost in translation. Nurses are often viewed as simply “present” doing the work, but defining that work is not communicated with clarity and purpose. Why? One often hears nurses say with a cheerful smile, “I am just doing my job,” “This is what is expected, it is nothing special,” or “I am just a nurse.” With such humble statements that connote a neutral self-image, it is no wonder there is confusion as to what role nurses play and how they are viewed by others.

There is work to be done to strengthen how nursing’s contributions are communicated within the workplace and beyond. However, in the pragmatic world of the daily workplace, there is little time to discuss such issues, unless it is made a priority. Typically, the chief nursing officer (CNO) and a team of nurse administrators expend a lot of energy building a large workforce with the hope of shaping a positive team with the outcome of excellent patient care. To create an organizational architecture that allows nurses to articulate how the organization is structured for success and how they as professionals bring value to the organization, nurses must have in place a full-fledged communication strategy. This strategy can contribute to giving nurses the ability to communicate their contributions to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, with confidence and ease.

Developing a Communication Strategy and Using Skills to Share the Message

Workforce development is a priority for all organizations. For the purposes of this article, Magnet experience and how it was a catalyst for developing a communication strategy for the nursing staff is described. The American Nursing Credentialing Center (ANCC) trademarked the phrase Journey to Magnet Excellence™, which is a perfect description for what is both an exhilarating and onerous process. The CNO realized communication can be a barrier if there is not a dedicated strategy in place. She believed communication should be approached as any other process, with a clear model, a definition understood by all, and a shared vocabulary.

A critical step in sharing the nurses’ dedication to providing quality care is an agreement on a definition of effective communication and how to incorporate it across the organization. The CNO employed a strategic communications consulting firm to provide guidance and training. Communication could help our nurses tell their story with both information and confidence. The result would be a workforce of confident, articulate, staff-driven stories that brought years of work to fruition through the outcome of redesignation of Magnet status. The definition of effective communication is being able to influence what the target audience hears, believes, and remembers and enlists them to carry your message. This is a simple, but dynamic way of thinking.

Words Matter

The power of words must not be underestimated; in fact, words are the most powerful memory drivers. Individual words are the starting point for all messages and by following a few simple rules, messages can be memorable. A common phenomenon is to pick up and repeat each other’s words. Words fall into two basic categories, “good words” and “bad words.” They are simplistically named to make it easy to remember the distinction (see Table 1).

“Good words” are the words you want your audience to repeat and remember. “Bad words” are the words you never want to repeat. Jargon is a subset of “bad words” because if your target audience does not understand a word, they stop listening and don’t remember the message. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention note “nearly nine out of 10 adults have difficulty following routine medical advice, largely because it’s often incomprehensible to average people” (Landro, 2010, p.1). While ANCC Magnet reviewers are extremely knowledgeable of medical terms, they need to know that you can speak in the language meaningful to patients and their families. Avoid jargon or give the definition if you must use it to make your point. Acronyms fall into this category as well; avoid confusion and increase understanding, spell them out.

Words have serious consequences. Organizations qualifying for Magnet designation need to show a very sophisticated understanding of internal and external audiences, as well as how to educate and motivate them beginning with “good words.”

Good words evolve into main messages, which are titled “headlines.” By definition, “headlines” are short, memorable, and the most powerful headlines make a claim. Nurses are extremely knowledgeable, but they also tend to be extremely humble or self-effacing and fact oriented. This can work against the Magnet designation process because it is particularly
the nurses at the bedside who need to stand out. Preparation begins with developing several “headlines” and using them liberally. For example, Table 2 reflects a headline rooted in three distinct “good words.”

Headlines never stand alone. While the best headlines make a claim, they also create an expectation to the listener that the speaker will validate or “prove” the claim. These are called “proof points,” as they validate the headline (see Table 3). Table 4 reflects an example of the basic Headline + Proof structure.

Proof points do not have a restriction on length; in fact, storytelling is encouraged. The most motivating proofs are stories, and quotes from other people (patients, co-workers, physicians). Stories are motivational by nature and nurses have a wealth of them to share. They can be named or unnamed to maintain confidentiality of the patient and the rules governing privacy.

Nurses can harness the power of words, and hone newfound skills by developing headlines and incorporating storytelling. It’s important to dedicate time to practice using headlines and storytelling for it requires changing behavior.

**Answer vs. Response**

Nurses are highly knowledgeable and by nature fact oriented. They answer exactly what is being asked and do not elaborate. While it is true a question is a request for information, it should also be viewed as an opportunity to satisfy the questioner and then move on to the headlines and stories developed to further illustrate key points. However, questioners have certain expectations. They do want an answer, but the word “answer” has an impact on one’s behavior. People tend to accept, and limit themselves to the parameters and topic of the question, rather than asking, “Who’s my audience? What do I want them to hear and remember?” The goal is to be both informative and proactive, and if this is incorporated into the approach it will be motivational as well.

Use a framing question, where a “yes” or “no” response is expected. Table 5 reflects a comparison of the “right” and “wrong” way to respond to this type of question. The “wrong” response is a lost opportunity. A successful exchange is when you “acknowledge” the question with a short, truthful response and then deliver your headline and proof point.

The real power of the “acknowledgment phrase” comes into play when a negative question is posed. Most people fall into the trap of repeating negative words (see Table 6). Table 7 reflects a successful exchange.

**Communication Skills Training**

Approximately 75 nurses were selected to participate in the communication skill training program. The participants, even those in front-line management roles, were uncomfortable being asked direct

---

**Table 2.**
**Headline**

“Our hospital prides itself on giving us numerous opportunities for professional development.”

**Table 3.**
**Proof Points**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informational Proof</th>
<th>Motivational Proof</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facts</td>
<td>Anecdotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivational Proof</td>
<td>Quotes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.**
**Headline + Proof Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Proof</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Our hospital prides itself on giving us numerous opportunities for professional development.”</td>
<td>“I received an advanced degree and tuition reimbursement while working full time at [hospital name].”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.**
**Wrong and Right Responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Does your hospital provide tuition reimbursement?”</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.**
**Wrong Response**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Acknowledgment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Does your hospital provide tuition reimbursement?”</td>
<td>“Absolutely”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Headline+Proof</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Our hospital prides itself on giving us numerous opportunities for professional development. In fact, I received an advanced degree and tuition reimbursement while working full time at [hospital name].”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
questions. A few were near tears and others said they simply couldn’t be counted on to deliver their positive messages. They knew how much was at stake, which only added to their anxiety. This misplaced humility and nervousness must be substituted with pride and confidence. By sharing proven techniques and giving nurses time to digest and practice their newly learned communication skills, the same nervous participants transformed in just a few short hours. Anxiety quickly turned to pride when they could see themselves and their peers coached in how to tell a compelling story that was a true reflection of their daily work. Gaining a level of comfort with the techniques, being critiqued, and then seeing the results, was very rewarding to all of the participants.

Videotaping staff nurses and letting them see the “before” and “after” of their presentations and Q&A sessions proved to be a powerful tool. They were able to see themselves as knowledgeable, compelling speakers. These videos were so effective we posted many of these interviews on the nursing web page as part of the CNO blog, Nancy’s Corner, so these exemplars could be viewed by nurses and other staff across all five hospitals. In the end, there were no better spokespersons than the staff nurses themselves.

Building the individual communication skills of the nurses helped the organization achieve Magnet redesignation. Once the nurses were able to utilize the checklist of skills to acknowledge questions and proactively provide headlines and stories, the ANCC Magnet appraisers heard, believed, and remembered the positive image.

In summation, the lessons learned from implementing a solid communication strategy were:

- **Make Effective Communication an Organizational Value.** Invest in developing employees’ communication skills: a multi-tiered plan, beginning with nurse administrators and continuing throughout the entire organization.

- **Imbed a Communication Plan as a Key Element in the Strategic Plan.** Have a solid definition and model of effective communication and identify resources to have staff developed in meeting this objective. Having such strategies is a good investment in developing staff for multiple challenges such as regulatory reviews, Magnet, team development, and customer relations among others. Such steps include:
  1. Identify internal and external audiences and have a clear plan for reaching them; in addition to verbal encounters, proactively develop videos and share quotes of nurses going above and beyond.
  2. Instill confidence by regularly encouraging discussion of all of the positive aspects of the profession.
  3. Train and rehearse utilizing video. One of the most powerful teaching tools is video.
  4. Practice effective interview techniques. Handling tough questions is part of the job, but accentuating the positive must be a part of the exchange.
  5. Avoid using negative words and examples, replace with positive stories and quotes; sharing truthful stories is a great way to counter a negative topic.

- **Utilize Staff in Multiple Marketing Opportunities Based on Stories They Have to Share.** A workforce comfortable with communications can be a major asset for an organization to tell its story externally in a compelling manner.

- **Celebrate Success.** Highlight nurses on the web page, and communicate their success broadly to build and maintain good will.

Empowering nurses to articulate their value is priceless. This strategy is an effective way to get our nurses to set aside their humility and verbalize their amazing attributes that make our hospital systems and health care in general, exceptional.

Table 6.
**Acknowledgment Phrase**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Are you ever asked to take shortcuts for budgetary reasons?”</td>
<td>“No, we aren’t asked to take shortcuts.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.
**Successful Exchange**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Acknowledgment</th>
<th>Headline+Proof</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Are you ever asked to take shortcuts for budgetary reasons?”</td>
<td>“On the contrary.”</td>
<td>“Delivering quality patient care is our promise. In fact, we have weekly meetings to ensure that we stay on budget and all of the items we need to provide quality care are ordered well ahead of time and are in stock when we need them.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued on page 43
Impacts & Innovations

continued from page 38

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL READINGS


