

Improve the Patient Experience—Ask a Nurse to Join the Board

BY LAURIE BENSON, NURSES ON BOARDS COALITION, AND SUSAN HASSMILLER, RN, PH.D., FAAN, ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

The Beryl Institute defines the patient experience as the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization's culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care. By this definition, the nursing profession is uniquely positioned to provide healthcare leaders with deep insight, data, evidence, and understanding of the multifaceted determinants of the resulting patient experience.

By necessity, all healthcare leaders are considering new approaches to improve the patient experience, as it directly impacts quality of care and outcomes. Healthcare leaders have the privilege and responsibility to apply their best thinking, resources, and evidence to improve patients' experiences and outcomes by providing exceptional healthcare, a caring and compassionate experience, and the ability to successfully transition from the hospital into the community.

This article looks at the benefits of inviting nurses into the boardroom and the positive impact this will have on the organization's patient experience efforts.

Inviting Nurse Leaders to the Boardroom

There are pragmatic and altruistic reasons for inviting nurse leaders to the boardroom to garner the best possible outcomes in a proactive, innovative, consistent, and sustainable way. Given that nurses represent the greatest number of healthcare professionals, they should participate in the discussions where strategy and policy decisions are made that impact the patient experience.

From our own experience serving on boards, we know the impact of the nursing perspective in the boardroom. Nurses are adept and immersed in working in teams, seeing a path forward amidst complexity, and creating and implementing plans to achieve the best patient outcomes and to improve the patient experience. They are able to consider the implications of decisions on staff, patients and their families, the hospital, and the community.

According to The Governance Institute, successful board members have various skills and knowledge. They understand the organization's services and the needs of the community, possess a high level of

integrity, are good listeners and collaborative and communicative leaders, build and maintain good relationships, ask questions, and are sensitive to cultural differences, among many other attributes. The best nurse leaders possess these competencies and use them daily.

One of the key characteristics of high-performing boards is diversity of people and ideas. Along with other healthcare professionals and board members, the dialogue becomes enhanced with the nursing profession's valuable perspective. But unfortunately, nurses fill less than 3 percent of healthcare board seats.¹ By bringing their vast experience, insight, and perspectives to the table, hospitals and health systems can add a diverse and patient-centered perspective.

Let us be clear: we believe inviting more nurse leaders to the boardroom will improve the board's effectiveness and efficiency in addressing the compelling business case to improve the patient experience in an integrated, systematic way throughout the organization. Our goal is not to benefit the nursing profession.

In the June issue of *Boardroom Press*, Michael R. Bleich, Ph.D., RN, FAAN, of Nursing Dynamics wrote, "Nurses are critical to the success of any hospital or health system. To enhance governance dialogue around nursing, boards need to have a basic understanding of their education and roles."²

Having more nurse leaders serving on the board brings the relevant linkage to the education, skills, abilities, and roles of nurses practicing in the organization into discussions on an ongoing basis. This is especially important when considering the implications of board decisions related to the patient experience. The nurse leader is an expert at providing examples that increase board member understanding of the patient experience, often resulting in different discussions, actions, and outcomes. As the profession most trusted by the public, nurses bring credibility and

Key Board Takeaways

The patient experience directly impacts quality of care and patient outcomes, affecting the hospital's bottom line. Nurse leaders are uniquely positioned to offer strategic and policy advice to ensure an optimal patient experience. Nurses serving on boards are prepared to:

- Consider the implications of decisions on staff, patients and their families, the hospital, and the community.
- Leverage their experiences caring for patients to improve measures of patient experience and quality of care.

Healthcare executives should invite nurse leaders into increasingly strategic roles, including the boardroom, to improve the patient experience and the organization's bottom line.

evidence-based practice that contribute to robust discussions to make dramatic changes in outcomes and quality of care.

How Might Nurse Leaders Impact the Patient Experience in the Boardroom?

With the HCAHPS scores now influencing Medicare reimbursement, healthcare leaders should note that nursing is directly involved with, and in some cases, drives activity in:

- Communication with nurses
- Responsiveness of hospital staff
- Pain management
- Communication about medicines
- Discharge information
- Care transition
- Cleanliness and quietness of hospital environment

Nurses have specific knowledge, training, experience, and direct influence in terms of the patient outcomes in each of these areas.

"Optimal patient experience cannot be reduced to checking off boxes. Patients and families have a right to expect that they will be treated with respect, that they will share responsibility for decisions about their care, that care will be safe and efficient, and that transitions in care will be well coordinated," says Katharyn May, Ph.D., RN, FAAN, Professor and former Dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Nursing, former member of the University of Wisconsin Hospital Authority Board, and immediate

1 Lawrence D. Prybil, "Engaging Nurses in Governing Hospitals and Health Systems," *Journal of Nursing Care Quality*, 2009.
2 Michael Bleich, "What Healthcare Boards Need to Know About Nursing," *BoardRoom Press*, The Governance Institute, June 2016.

past chair of the Patient Safety and Quality Council. “Of course, all care providers are important in this, but when the main product line is nursing care, nurses drive patient satisfaction.”

Nurses, along with other members of the healthcare team, are inextricably linked to these measures of the patient experience and quality of care. Their firsthand knowledge of factors affecting clinical outcomes and patient perceptions can shed light on root causes to discover and explore opportunities for improvement.

“We know the push for quality is stronger than ever,” said David Knowlton, who served as President and CEO of the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute until his retirement in 2015. “Any hospital that wants to avoid the Medicare penalties or—just as harmful—the bad publicity that can follow low quality ratings needs a nurse on its board.”³

3 David Knowlton, “Hospitals Must Recruit Nurses to Their Leadership Boards,” *RWJF Human Capital Blog*, 2014.

The nurse can provide exceptional care and show compassion to significantly impact how patients’ perceive their experience. In fact, how patients feel about their experience plays a key role in their willingness to return to the hospital or health system for care and refer others there.

Embracing the Role of Nurses in the Boardroom

What might be possible at your organization if you invited nursing professionals into increasingly strategic roles, including the boardroom? We encourage boards to discuss at an upcoming meeting how they might enable nurse leaders to join the board in strategic discussions to improve the patient experience.

The board most likely will need to approach nurse leaders in the organization to invite them to serve on the board, since many nurses will not self-promote. But you can be certain, once asked, that nurse leaders will deliver in the boardroom, just as they deliver for the patients and families they feel privileged to serve every day.

Everyone Benefits

An added benefit of inviting nurses to join the board is that word will spread fast throughout the organization. When a nurse leader makes valuable contributions on the board, that individual will typically credit the entire board for their role in bringing about the significant improvements in the patient experience. Nevertheless, nurses at all levels will feel valued and empowered, which translates into increased engagement in improvement activities and stronger commitment to the organization. Ultimately, your patients will benefit. ●

The Governance Institute thanks Laurie Benson, Executive Director, Nurses on Boards Coalition, and Susan Hassmiller, RN, Ph.D., FAAN, Senior Advisor for Nursing, and Director, Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, for contributing this article. They can be reached at laurie.benson@ana.org and shassmi@rwjf.org.