

Nurse Leadership and the Human Experience: A Framework for Elevating Care and Caring

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Nurse leaders today oversee the largest segment of the health care workforce and as a result have the greatest influence on how people today experience health care overall. In addressing the human experience in health care, nurse leader success will come from a careful balancing act of caring for those seeking care and for those who provide it. Grounded in research from consumers of care, high performing health care units, and experienced nurse leaders, and acknowledging the care models that support nursing efforts daily, a framework for elevating care and caring is proposed as a foundation for action in elevating the health care experience.

EXPANDING OUR FOCUS TO HUMAN EXPERIENCE

There may be no more critical role in health care today than nurse leadership. I do not simply offer that because this is a piece for *Nurse Leader*, but rather in the context of a new health care reality, where consumers of health care are demanding more, patients are expecting more, and our healthcare teams are working harder than ever. Nurse leaders today oversee what remains the largest segment of the health care workforce¹ and as a result have perhaps the greatest influence on how people today experience health care overall. It is understood that the experience people have in health care is both broad and deep, and every individual a patient encounters all contribute to the experience they have. It is also evident that as the largest segment of the workforce, nurses have potentially the greatest impact on the experience people have in health care.²

In considering experience from this perspective, we can define experience in a focused, yet expansive way as the sum of all interactions, based on an organization's culture that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care.³ From this definition of experience, we see the underlying criticality of the interactions we create in health care, one human being to another, and reinforce these interactions are framed by the culture on which an organization is built. This idea elevates the conversation that health care experience is not just 1 dimensional and focused on those who receive care, but is multidimensional and focused on all who impact the experience delivered as well. To do so requires an expanded perspective to the human experience in health care.

It is also critical that we not simply relegate experience to our traditional perspectives of satisfaction or even service. Far too often, experience is pushed to the edges of organizational priorities as a soft science

due to the fact that it is separated from the other priorities of health care. This happens at a dire cost to organizational success.

When one looks at experience in limited terms, the true implications and impact of the human experience are overlooked. When we look at health care through the lenses of those served, the ideas of quality, safety, service, cost, access, outcomes, and more are not segmented items they evaluate separately, but rather are all part of 1 experience they have. Although health care may have operationalized itself to manage those as distinct points of focus, they are but 1 point for a patient or family member who engages a health care organization.

With this perspective, it is imperative that health care organizations committed to elevating experience work vigorously to find ways to align and coordinate efforts across these multiple fronts to ensure seamless and aligned experience for those they care for. Simply stated, a conversation on human experience is not one separate from that of quality improvement. Rather,

KEY POINTS

- **As the largest segment of the workforce, nurses have the greatest impact on the human experience.**
- **Nurse leaders' success comes from a balancing act of caring for those seeking care and those who provide it.**
- **Nurse leaders will positively impact care and elevate the human experience by focusing on listening, communicating, being present, and creating space for humanity to emerge.**

Table 1. Top 5 Factors Impacting Experience as Identified by Health Care Consumers

Consumer-Rated Items	% Very + Extremely Important
<i>Listen to you</i>	95%
<i>Communicate clearly in a way you can understand</i>	95%
<i>Treat you with courtesy and respect</i>	95%
<i>Give you confidence in their abilities</i>	94%
<i>Take your pain seriously</i>	93%

Table 2. Top 5 Factors Influencing Experience as Identified by High Performing Health Care Units

Influence Factor	% Great + Greatest
<i>Effective communication with patients/families</i>	99%
<i>How patients/families are personally treated</i>	99%
<i>Teamwork among the care team</i>	98%
<i>Engagement level of employees</i>	97%
<i>Clinical team well-being</i>	96%

quality improvement, addressing safety issues, and more are all efforts that contribute to the experience health care provides overall.⁴ This is where health care must meet the expectations of the consumers and patients it serves today. This may be no better framed than in 2 recent explorations by The Beryl Institute.

A CONVERGENCE IN DATA: A RETURN TO PURPOSE

This focus on human experience is supported by 2 converging points in data. The first, what consumers of health care identified as extremely important to their health care experience. The second, what high performing health care units saw as essential to their ability to achieve experience success.

In identifying the items consumers deemed most important to a positive health care experience, the top 5 items they identified are seen in [Table 1](#).

What is seen in this response is that the very idea at the heart of the definition of experience, the interactions between people, is where consumers look to in identifying a positive experience. This underlines a critical opportunity for nurse leaders as they create environments where the people they engage and the behaviors and actions they expect are grounded not only in clinical excellence, but also in the human touch so essential to good care.

In conjunction with this, high performing healthcare units when asked what factors have the greatest influence on achieving a positive healthcare experience, answered with a very similar top 5 as shown in [Table 2](#).

What was interesting in these findings was that, although aligned around communication and the treatment of those being cared for first, what was also identified by the high performers were issues related to the people delivering care. With a focus on teamwork, engagement, and team well-being, the second element of the definition of experience, culture, was also reinforced. This further elevates the opportunity for nurse leaders to ensure they are supporting environments that are positive for staff as well as patients.

This convergence of data supports a recognition that a conversation on experience and the role for nurse leaders cannot and must not be simply unidirectional. In fact, nurse leader success will come from a careful balancing act of caring for those seeking care and for those who provide it. This also calls for a skill set focused on a broader commitment to human experience that can be driven by nurse leaders and that will have significant and positive impact for the entirety of their health care organization.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ACTION: LESSONS FROM NURSE LEADERS

In a recent article on the role of nurse executives in patient experience, key suggestions were offered by leaders on what they saw as essential to experience success and the critical skills-based actions nurse leaders could take to ensure an effective focus on the experience.⁷ These nurse executives from across the spectrum of delivery organizations and from a range of perspectives collec-

tively identified considerations for nurse leaders, and these lessons for nurse leaders⁷ frame practical and actionable efforts to address the human experience.

- *Committing to leadership rounding.* The idea being that in order for nurse leaders to understand what is happening in their organization and both convey needed information as well as model expected actions and behaviors, nurse leaders must manage, not from their office, but from the units where care is delivered.⁸
- *Committing to listening and building processes that support it.* These nurse leaders interviewed underlined the critical nature of hearing what their people had to say, gathering the insights they had and learning about their experiences. In gathering that information in an active and positive way, opportunities for improvement were readily identified such as safety or quality issues, standards were reinforced, purpose was reinvigorated, and outcomes positively impacted.
- *Ensuring everyone recognizes they impact the patient experience.* One of the most important things the nurse leaders offered was the need to reinforce to all their staff that they play a vital role in the overall experience the organization provides each and every patient and person they serve. Whether directly at the bedside or in back of the house roles, every interaction, the sum of all interactions, reflects the experience of the organization and any weak link in that chain can alter the experience they are all attempting to provide together.
- *Elevating the importance of shared leadership.* The recognition that everyone impacts the experience then reinforces the importance of shared leadership. The nurse leaders interviewed recognized they could not do, nor should they do everything, but in fact effective executives developed and nurtured leaders and afforded the opportunity for all on their staff to lead in any moment from the bedside to the executive suite.
- *Connecting focus with a sense of purpose.* Finally, in ensuring people recognize their role as a leader in the experience people have in the organization no matter what their title or level, it also provides the opportunity for a return to purpose. When an organization moves from a tactical process focus to a human experience focus, we do not lose sight of the critical items of importance in health care such as quality, safety, or service. Rather, we reframe those opportunities in a way that speaks to the very nature of why so many people chose health care in the first place—to care for others.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ELEVATING CARE AND CARING

The alignment of all these ideas—that being the shift to a focus on human experience, the convergence of

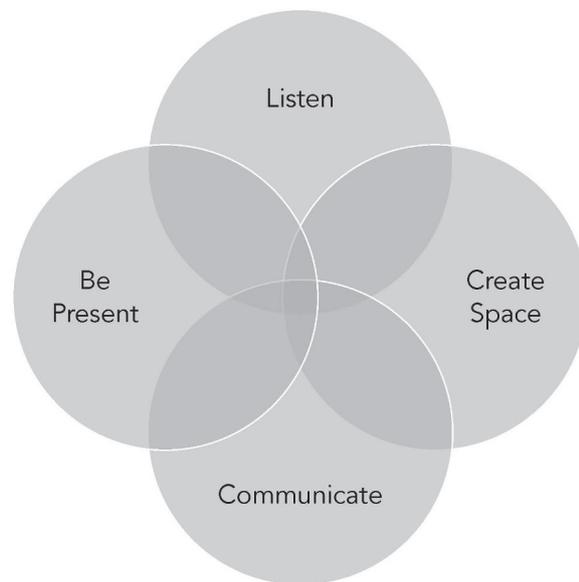


Figure 1. A Framework for Elevating the Human Experience

data on what is most important to the health care experience, and the insights of experienced executives practicing in the field—helps to triangulate an unmistakable opportunity for nurse leadership overall. It provides the content to support and the means to create a framework for elevating care and caring as nurse leaders. In recognizing that a number of care models exist that have foundational and critical application in the work nursing does every day, there is an opportunity to expand this focus from the practice of nursing to the leadership of nursing.

Jean Watson's model⁹ touches on the heart work that is entailed in the caring process. It also provides a framework for balancing a focus on self and others and about the attentiveness to the transpersonal. What sits powerfully at its heart is the idea that caring is inclusive, circular, and expansive. It reinforces the critical aspects identified previously such as respect, listening, responsiveness, trust, and understanding needs. In many ways, this was the essence of what the nurse leaders interviewed alluded to in their practical insights.

In alignment with this, Dingman et al.¹⁰ identified 5 caring behaviors that dig deeper into the actions one can take when looking to provide the best in caring behaviors. They include:

- Introducing oneself to the patient and their family, and explaining one's role in the patient's care
- Calling the patient by his or her preferred name
- Being seated at the bedside to discuss the patient's care plan
- The use of touch, a hand shake, and a thank you
- Utilizing the mission and values of the organization to guide the delivery of care

What is again evident in these behaviors is the need for effective communication and understanding, presence, and the recognition that the organization you create provides the frame in which any care is delivered. It is truly the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization's culture, and that is what a nurse leader has the ultimate opportunity to impact.

As we look deeper into how these ideas connect, the data from consumers and practitioners, the insights from leadership, the vision of theory with which it is aligned all shed light on what can be a powerful framework for nurse leaders in elevating the human experience in health care. As we look to what this framework can include, the hope is this piece is just the start of a dialogue on what actions and efforts can fall under these 4 points. At the same time, we can reinforce the importance of these concepts for all nurse leaders striving to care for all who serve and are served by their respective health care organizations.

In boiling down the convergence of these ideas to their essence we are left with a simple framework for elevating human experience for nurse leaders (*Figure 1*). It is grounded on the consistent themes heard and on 4 core concepts: listen, communicate, be present, and create space. Although broad topics, these 4 ideas provide great context for what can be done in executing this framework.

Listen

This is more than simply hearing those around you, be they patients and family members, peers or colleagues, employees or staff. Listening is about taking the time to understand what is being said, where it is coming from, and why it is important to the individual delivering the message. It is bringing the whole of a person into what they deliver in a way that provides deeper meaning and context for action. It may be about a potential improvement need or a simple statement about fear someone has for an upcoming procedure. But ensuring one finds time to listen beyond just hearing, to take in what one says, to digest it, to own it, and to acknowledge it is a fundamental for nurse leaders looking to positively impact human experience.

Communicate

This is not just about delivering information, that is limited and 1-sided. Rather, communicating in this light is about bringing life and context to the words and information shared, and about providing that communication, as our consumers said they wanted, clearly and in a way they can understand. This, too, is not simply about clinician-to-patient conversation; it must also happen peer to peer, and nurse leaders can and must model this. All too often, communication is taken for granted and in many cases becomes a cause for misses and errors. This is not a nice task we must consider, but a process that is integral to the very fundamentals of safe, quality, reliable, and human care.

Be Present

Models of care consistently provide ideas for creating greater connection to those receiving care from sitting, to gentle touch, and more. But the physicality of presence is only 1 aspect of this critical component of the human experience. Those we interact with, be they patients or peers, want to and expect that we are there with them. In the dynamic and chaotic world of health care, this can be a challenge as multiple priorities, distractions, and other elements seek to disrupt the personal nature of human interaction. It should be acknowledged that perhaps above all else, human beings in health care, be they patients or colleagues, hunger to be acknowledged. This can only be achieved through presence, through being fully with the person in front of you, be it for seconds, minutes, or more. Finding the time to be present in the moments one finds themselves as leader, not only helps focus the intent of that interaction, but it also reduces the pressures in that moment. It provides clarity and quiet, and elevates the capacity to more effectively listen, communicate, and ultimately act.

Create Space

The ideas of listening, communicating, and presence are unwaveringly integrated into the final element for consideration by nurse leaders. That is the need to create space. This is not necessarily the physical space in which one finds themselves, but rather the space into which people can step, listen, and communicate. Creating space means there is safety in raising issues that some might otherwise be afraid to. Creating space means creating comfort for those seeking care to ask questions confidently and express fears and concerns without hesitation. And creating space is not done by 1 person alone. In creating space, nurse leaders, and all other health care leaders, must ensure that the cultural environment they create allows for this to occur. In isolation, these efforts may be seen as outliers or nice efforts by compassionate people. Organizations that ensure they collectively create space are those that will be recognized above all else for a commitment to human experience.

Although each of these ideas calls for more specific action, for nurse leaders, a foundation on which to build is critical. In understanding where health care is going, the challenges it faces, the expectations that are placed on it, and in recognizing the brilliance and compassion of the people that choose this for their work, the opportunity in elevating the human experience is not far from reach. But it is also not something you do with the simple declaration of values, a program of culture change, or behavioral expectations and training.

It must and will only come with the intention of holding these needs true, by ensuring they are part of what is essential to the way an organization lives and breathes, and to ensure that with consistency, that is the

way organizations will operate moving forward. There may be no better placed leader in health care to drive this than nurse leaders. That is the exciting opportunity each of you face in elevating the humanity in health care. It is what brought you to this work, and it is what you can and will impact in a focus on elevating the human experience in healthcare. The next step is yours.

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