

The Patient Experience Post

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What Nurse Leaders Really Think About the Patient Experience

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

What is the patient experience? It is, in the most literal sense, every interaction—every, single interaction—that a patient has with a health system and all of its many moving parts during an encounter. The Beryl Institute defines it as: *the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization's culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care.* Those experiences often take place in various settings, but hospital patient experiences can be the most impactful for a patient, and their family members. Therefore, it is often the hospital experience that holds the greatest opportunities to either delight or dismay the patients.

Nurses obviously play a key role in the hospital patient experience. After all, they are the caretakers who have the most frequent and personal interactions with patients. They are most often the glue as the communication conduit between physicians and patients. No hospital could function without them.

With this as a core belief, about a year ago, I set out to interview CNOs from around the country in an attempt to learn from them how they see their role. Their candid discussions revealed lessons learned as well as determination to better engage nurses in the patient experience. After synthesizing their input, I've created a white paper based on these in-depth interviews exploring the nurse leader's perspective on the patient experience and how they view their leadership roles. The paper explores their leadership strategies for engaging nurses in order to achieve buy-in for sustainable results. The white paper shares these leaders' insights and lessons learned as they guide their organizations' nurses toward more consistently positive patient experiences. Although the full white paper won't be released until the AONE meeting in Fort Worth starting March 30th, I wanted to share one of the core findings here.

I asked these nurse leaders a number of questions and generated a wealth of insightful perspectives and lessons learned over literally decades of clinical experience. Here, though, I'll share the response to just one of these questions: "What do you want every nurse on your team to know about his or her role in the patient experience?"

This simple question evoked deep and meaningful responses from the nurse leaders that conveyed their passion for the profession and the role nurses play in the patient experience. What I heard from these leaders in response to that specific question was three-fold.

1. **"We (nurses) are pivotal to patient experience, so everything matters."** Some of those I interviewed said things like: "It's really an honor to be involved in peoples' lives at times when they are so vulnerable. They put their trust in us." Because of this, these nurse leaders told me that it is so important for them and the nurses they

lead to be mindful every day, and through every encounter, of the significant impact they have on these patients and their family members. They said: “It’s about how we show up—our facial expressions, our demeanor, our communication and our knowledge – the full package.”

2. **“We (nurses) must be “fully present.”** Nurses deal with a wide range of responsibilities on a daily basis and are adept at multi-tasking. Sometimes so adeptly that they aren’t fully present during some interactions throughout their busy days. Being fully present sounds like it should be simple enough, but it’s not. These nurse leaders shared the challenges their nurses face as they juggle an ever growing number of responsibilities. Their challenges are compounded not only by the number of patients they serve, but by the increasing acuity of these patients’ medical needs and the rapid adoption of new technology that nurses must use as they perform their tasks. One best practice for ensuring they are present when dealing with patients is to literally stop at the patient’s door, touch the door frame, take a deep breath and bring your mind, and viscerally connect in that moment. Encourage your nursing staff to get in the habit of doing this, and you’ll see tangible benefits—both for them and for their patients!
3. **“Care.”** Nurse leaders want their nurses to care and they want that care to be evident. Behavioral standards can come into play here and can go a long way toward ensuring that nurses know the tangible things that are expected of them as they engage with patients. Nurse leaders talked about skill building but really stressed that they wanted nurses on their team to have caring hearts.

It goes without saying that nurses play an enormous role in the patient experience. While leaders stressed several other key issues involved in creating a culture of ownership, their responses to this specific question; What do you want every nurse on your team to know about his or her role in the patient experience?, revealed the importance of the leader connecting passion and purpose. Every leader interviewed expressed the importance of nurses who truly care about other human beings.

The nurse leaders interviewed for this research are clearly connected to purpose and they have an astounding amount of knowledge and experience to share. I’ve incorporated those insights into my white paper which will be released during this year’s AONE conference. If one of your nurse leaders will be attending the conference, give them a copy of this column and encourage them to stop at Booth # 1324 to get a copy of the white paper including an infographic that summarizes the key findings from the research.

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.