

Taking Charge

Critical Questions that Nurses should Ask Themselves

By
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Learning to be in charge of your personal and professional life is sometimes just a matter of examining your attitude. Ask yourself these questions.

1. Do I see change as an opportunity or a threat?

The healthcare industry has produced many positive changes such as more effective and less invasive surgical techniques. Two procedures that have substantially decreased recovery time are arthroscopic surgery and lens implantation for cataracts. High tech diagnostic techniques such as MRI are also invaluable. Outpatient care has changed staffing patterns and increased the demand for nurses in ambulatory care. Companies require nurses who are willing to cross-train and accept new roles.

It's easy to resent change but smarter to anticipate and accept it. Look at the big picture. What departments in your organization are growing? Do you see the same pattern in other organizations?

It helps to read a variety of newspapers and magazines to spot trends. Talk to your peers but also talk with people in other occupations. Be willing to honestly assess whether your skills fit into the new trends.

To make change easier, maintain a sense of control. Avoid feeling helpless. When change is inevitable, ask to be part of the implementation task force. Since nurses spend the most time with patients, our input is vital. We need to communicate our perspective and participate in the decision-making process.

2. How can I be proactive?

When you are passive, you discount your own expertise. Choosing not to decide is a decision. You also erode your own soul and lose self-respect when you don't live according to your values. Being proactive is a risk because you might fail to achieve your goals and also discover that others don't support you. Have a realistic attitude knowing that no one's ideas are accepted every time.

If you notice that your organization's discharge education is inadequate, get involved in revising the education protocol. Suppose you have an order to give a stat dose of medication to an agitated elderly patient. Taking the patient's age and vital signs in consideration, you think that the dose is too high. You alert the physician to the situation.

How can you be proactive?

- Have confidence in your knowledge and abilities while understanding that you don't know it all.
- Be a lifelong learner
- Activate your desire to make a difference

3. Have I improved my communication skills lately?

Taking time to listen is time well spent. Listen for both what is said and what is not said. My experience in healthcare has taught me that people frequently withhold what they really think because they are afraid. Listen with empathy so you know how others perceive situations.

It's important to adapt your communication style to each interaction. When it comes to communication, one size does not fit all. Master many communication styles so that you will be prepared for any situation. Then ask for feedback to see if your message has been understood. Sometimes it helps to read a book about communication such as *People Skills* by Robert Bolton.

A sense of trust is also essential. Remember how you feel when you don't trust someone. You probably don't take them seriously. Act with integrity so that what you say is credible.

4. What responsibility will I take for my actions and of those reporting to me?

Many healthcare decisions have to be made before all of the important information is available. Suppose a patient feels lightheaded. This symptom could be insignificant or it could be the beginning of a major problem. To complicate matters, the diagnostic reports aren't always completed. Still you have to decide right away what additional questions to ask and whether to take action. Suppose this is a home care patient who won't be reassessed for 24 hours or more. Will he or she be safe? You are accountable for your decisions and must depend on your knowledge and experience to make the right choices.

If you are responsible for the decisions of employees reporting to you, teach them to be good decision-makers within their scope of responsibility. Specify what situations they should report to you. Encourage your staff to ask questions when they are not sure of something. Laws regarding nurse delegation and accountability for your employees' actions vary from state to state. Contact the Board of Nursing in your state to obtain this necessary information.

5. Do I respect others and myself?

Sometimes it is difficult to choose between doing what is easiest and doing what is right. True self-confidence happens when our inner selves are congruent with our outer selves. This self-confidence generates a sense of control over our lives, which in turn helps us cope with change. Respecting ourselves is also the foundation for respecting and valuing diversity in others.

Of course, we have faults; we are all human. It is our response to those faults that makes a difference. Since public speaking and writing skills make us more articulate, join a public speaking or writers group to improve those skills. Sometimes weaknesses can be transformed into strengths. Weaknesses are just skills that we have not yet learned. Say to yourself, "No one was born with this skill. Others learned it just like I have" You will discover that you can excel at a new skill if you focus enough energy and attention on it.

Learning to take charge involves self-assessment as well as planning. Every day nurses make assessments and write care plans that include problem identification and action plans. Start by building on your strengths. Then, if you have identified any problems (actual or potential), use a solid plan of action to carry out your plan. You will then be able to enjoy the satisfaction that comes from knowing that you are the one in charge of your personal and professional life.

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