

# Leadership in Nursing: Professional Accountability and Responsibility

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Anureet Bhullar & Serena Rose

## Abstract

Expectations for new graduate nurses (NGNs) upon entry to practice are extensive. Alberta's nursing regulatory body, the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA), outlines these competencies in several key documents. In this paper, we explore the importance of NGNs, as novice healthcare leaders, to intentionally pursue the foundational standard of accountability and responsibility through effective communication. We will discuss this competency's presentation, importance, methods of practice, and methods of growth assessment. These insights will be supported by relevant literature and a personal anecdote, providing a well-rounded perspective for the proposed guidance on nursing leadership competencies for NGNs.

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## Leadership Competencies for Entry to Practice

In the fast-paced world of healthcare, strong leadership in nursing isn't just a title; it is the driving force behind safe, high-quality patient care. Nurses have many roles in the healthcare setting. They are advocates, educators, collaborators, and leaders (College of Registered Nurses of Alberta [CRNA], 2019). New graduate nurses (NGNs) must be intentional about the competencies they want to develop. Leadership in nursing consists of influencing and guiding others to achieve the best possible health outcomes (CRNA, 2019). We believe that the most important leadership competencies for NGNs to prioritize are professional responsibility and accountability, which can be demonstrated through effective communication. These competencies are essential as they increase patients' trust in the healthcare system and promote patient safety. A simple way to practice effective communication is through active listening and use of a standardized tool. Lastly, evaluating success can be done through self-reflecting and seeking feedback.

## Key Leadership Competencies

The College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA) created two foundational documents, both outlining specific expectations that Alberta nurses must adhere to in order to deliver optimal patient care. One of these documents, *Entry-Level Competencies* (CRNA, 2019), focuses specifically on the expectations of novice nurses. *Practice Standard for Registrants* (CRNA,

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2023) describes the minimum responsibilities for all practicing nursing professionals. These documents are both comprehensive and extensive, emphasizing the multitude of skills required to be effective healthcare leaders.

There are two specific complementary indicators that are essential for NGNs to intentionally pursue as foundational competencies. Firstly, Standard 1.0 from the Practice Standards for Registrants outlines the need for professional responsibility and accountability among members of the profession (CRNA, 2023). Secondly, Competency Category 3.0 from the Entry-Level Competencies document describes the requirement of registered nurses (RNs) to be effective communicators (CRNA, 2019). These two indicators should be pursued in conjunction. In our opinion, one of the best ways to be accountable and responsible is to be an effective communicator.

Effective communication can be broadly described as being clear and concise, as well as delivering information professionally to create an impact. The CRNA (2019) defines communication among entry-level nurses as sharing information, maintaining therapeutic environments, and building professional relationships. This may include a nurse introducing themselves to a patient and completing timely and accurate documentation. Intentional implementation of these strategies by NGNs will ensure meaningful communication with patients and coworkers, modelling both accountability and responsibility over their practice.

### **Importance of Effective Communication**

There are several reasons why responsibility and accountability through communication should be prioritized competencies for NGNs. Firstly, as described by the CRNA (2019) in Competency 3.3, communication skills are essential for establishing a sense of trust with patients, which is necessary to foster a therapeutic relationship. This will create a strong foundation upon which all other competencies can be built. Effective communication skills are also required to fulfill other obligations described under the accountability and responsibility standard. In order to question policies and procedures to ensure patient safety (Indicator 1.5), for example, one must be able to communicate these concerns professionally and respectfully (CRNA, 2023). To practice within their scope and level of competence (Indicators 1.6, 1.7), nurses must be able to effectively self-advocate their boundaries and convey both their abilities and limitations through strong communication (CRNA, 2023). These competencies are intertwined and foundational for the development of additional skills. Responsibility, accountability, and communication must

therefore be pursued together to foster the relationship with both patients and coworkers to deliver the best possible care.

The interdependence of communication, professional responsibility, and accountability is demonstrated in clinical practice, where communicating effectively is often critical to ensuring timely, appropriate, and potentially life-saving interventions. A recent experience in an emergency department suggests to us that effective communication can be lifesaving. An example situation is: An elderly male patient was clutching his chest, pale and diaphoretic, screaming, “I am going to die. My heart is going to explode.” At that moment, gathering key details about his pain and medical history from his daughter led to performing a 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG). The results revealed a myocardial infarction.

Effectively communicating the findings to a physician led to the transfer of the patient to the cardiac catheterization lab for further treatment. This case illustrates the importance of communicating clearly and concisely with the interdisciplinary team to ensure rapid, life-saving care. Furthermore, it highlights how communication between healthcare providers and patients builds the trust necessary for collaborative and safe patient care.

### **Practicing Effective Communication**

Active listening is a key component that ensures impactful interactions in nursing, thus strengthening effective communication skills and nursing practice. Leaders always listen to a message before formulating solutions, and listening goes beyond simply hearing (Mahoney et al., 2023). Similarly, CRNA (2019) suggests nurses use active listening while communicating with patients to understand their experiences, preferences, and health goals. Active listening involves giving a speaker full attention and focus, waiting for them to finish before responding, asking for clarification when needed, repeating your understanding, and using open body language (Tennant et al., 2023). Such open body language includes smiling, maintaining eye contact, using a soft tone of voice, and using a relaxed body posture (Abdulghafor et al., 2022).

Situation Background Assessment Recommendation (SBAR) is a standardized framework that enhances interprofessional communication. Murphy et al. (2022) revealed that ineffective communication leads to negative patient outcomes, which the SBAR framework can reduce. Furthermore, applying the SBAR framework to the scenario mentioned above would lead to more effective, concise, and impactful communication. For example, saying, “There is a 76-year-old male in B13 who has indescribable substernal chest pain that is radiating to his left shoulder. On my assessment, I see that he is pale and diaphoretic, his vital signs are within

normal limits, and he has an extensive cardiac history. I recommend performing a 12-lead ECG and calling the physician.” Using the SBAR tool for the scenario mentioned creates a clear picture of the situation and allows for timely patient treatment.

### **Measuring Improvement**

Incorporating self-reflection into practice is essential to evaluate and improve communication skills. The CRNA (2019) states that a good nurse leader uses self-reflection and actively seeks feedback. So, NGNs must practice self-reflection each day after their shift. A simple way to reflect is by asking “What?”, “So what?”, and “What now?” (Brock University, 2024). Reflecting on daily interactions and asking the following questions can increase self-awareness and improve communication skills. A prospective leader might ask, ‘What happened? What did I do? What did I learn? Why does it matter if I use active listening and SBARs to communicate? What could I have done differently?’ Self-reflection will help assess performance quality and identify areas for improvement.

Another effective strategy for gauging improvement of communication skills is actively seeking feedback from mentors, including senior nurses, managers, and nurse educators. In a recent scoping review examining success factors among NGNs, Song et al. (2023) found that receiving feedback helped mitigate transfer shock. Novice nurses are still beginning to establish their practice, which can cause uncertainty and stress. Colleagues can offer an external perspective on NGNs growth, helping to inform their professional development goals during such a transitory time.

### **Conclusion**

Professional responsibility and accountability demonstrated through effective communication are foundational leadership competencies for NGNs. As supported by regulatory bodies, strong communication skills are essential for building therapeutic relationships and critical for ensuring patient safety and advocating within one’s scope of practice. Effective communication, characterized by clarity, concision, and impact empowers nurses to navigate complex clinical situations, contribute meaningfully to interprofessional teams, and uphold the highest standards of care. Practicing tools like SBAR and honing active listening skills allow NGNs to communicate more effectively, while reflection and feedback provide valuable insights into ongoing growth and competence. Prioritization of the core competencies highlighted will continue to strengthen nurses’ ability to lead, adapt, and inspire as they progress in their professional career, fostering long-term growth and excellence among nursing leadership.

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