

# Spotting a healthy work environment—and landing a job in it

Prepare yourself for a job in the work environment that matches your goals and values.

By Michelle Perregrini, MSN, RN-BC, CPAN, CAPA

**S**earching for a new job can be daunting. In addition to the stress that comes from interviewing, most of us worry about how to ensure that we choose the right employer. To make the best choice possible, consider the environment of care in which you'll be working. Look for a healthy work environment (HWE) that includes opportunities for growth, shared governance, and coworker and leadership support.

## Why environment matters

An HWE not only supports you in your role, but also helps retain staff and leaders. Lack of an HWE sparks turnover and staff shortages from stress and burnout. And when staff levels fall too low (and staff have less organizational knowledge), length of stay, healthcare-acquired infections, and mortality increase. This creates more stress, more turnover, and more negative patient outcomes. On the other hand, an HWE promotes staff retention and positive patient outcomes.

## A matter of health

What makes a work environment healthy? The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (ANCC) identifies six components: skilled communication, true collaboration, effective decision-making, appropriate staffing, meaningful recognition, and authentic leadership. Learn more about each component at [aacn.org/nursing-excellence/healthy-work-environments](http://aacn.org/nursing-excellence/healthy-work-environments).

The American Nurses Association (ANA), which has a section about HWE on its website ([nursing-world.org/practice-policy/work-environment](http://nursing-world.org/practice-policy/work-environment)), says that nurses need to work in an environment that's "safe, empowering, and satisfying." ANA's



# Effective vs. ineffective leadership

Nurse leader behavior in key situations provides insight into an organization's approach to work-life balance.

Scenario	Ineffective leadership	Effective leadership
Miscommunication or error	Avoids or assigns blame to other departments	Takes responsibility and is accountable
Crucial conversations	Circumvents discussion or changes the subject	Assigns time and privacy for conversation
Description of unit members	Refers to everyone as "my staff"	Refers to everyone as "my team"
Huddles	Calls long, vague huddles during busy times	Plans focused huddles in the morning when everyone is present and not as busy
Approachability	Claims an open-door policy but always has the door closed or is distracted during discussions	Is honest about how much time he or she has or reschedules to give full attention
Hospital-wide meetings	Doesn't sit with team	Sits with team
Everyday workflow	Follows the standard formula, no matter what's happening on the unit	Makes adjustments as needed to support care quality and nurse/patient safety

Bill of Rights for Registered Nurses may be helpful when evaluating a work environment.

## Evaluating the work environment

The interview process gives you the ideal opportunity to evaluate whether an organization has an HWE. It's also an opportunity to ensure that you'll be seen as a valuable asset to the organization, so you can land the job you want in that HWE.

Start your interview preparations by researching the hospital. Explore its website, looking for its mission and values, paying particular attention

to the nursing-focused pages such as ANCC Magnet Recognition®, staff incentives, and continuing education requirements. Review the organization's nursing philosophy and statistics on retention and turnover. You'll probably be asked, "Why this hospital?" Your answer should align with the department's and organization's

mission and reflect that you've researched what they stand for.

During your research and the interview, keep leadership and work-life balance in mind. Both are key contributors to an HWE.

## Leadership

Nurse managers are essential contributors to nursing

practice excellence, staff nurse engagement, and patient satisfaction. They're also responsible for creating and supporting an HWE.

Consider your current place of employment or the last supervisor/charge nurses you worked with. Was it a positive learning environment where you felt supported? According to Henrikson, strong nursing leadership is needed to create practice environments that are healthy and safe for nurses and patients. Nurse managers can create practice environments that influence patient care quality, nurse job satisfaction levels, and performance goal achievement. (See *Effective vs. ineffective leadership*.)

## Work-life balance

A positive work-life balance results in employee job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, retention, and a healthy personal life. When work and life are out of balance, the opposite is true.

Finding the ideal work-life balance can be difficult, especially if you're used to long hours and overtime, with little downtime to replenish, rest, and recharge for your next shift. During your interviews, watch for warning signs that might indicate lack of support for a healthy work-life balance. (See *Red flags*.)

## Tips for success

So, you've found an organization with an HWE, but how do you make sure you get picked for the job? Follow these steps to help you stand out.

**Anticipate questions.** Whether your inter-

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view takes place with a direct supervisor or a panel, it will probably include behavioral questions that aren't related to the position or your experience. For example:

- **What are some of your outside hobbies?** The interviewers want to learn about your work-life balance, including evidence that you have supportive plans to maintain health and self-care.
- **Describe a time when you had limited resources. How did you ensure the task was completed?** Interviewers aren't looking for you to have all the answers. They want to know that you're able to identify who you can go to for help or where you can find the answers that you need.
- **How have you handled previous feedback?** Provide an example. This isn't necessarily about previous performance evaluations. Your answer can reflect interactions with patients, family members, physicians, and coworkers, particularly how you deal with difficult conversations.

Each member of the panel should be provided with a copy of your résumé, but take extra copies, along with any projects, presentations, or clinical ladder work you've completed. Remember that the interviewers want you to do well; they're looking for their next team member. Rehearse with a coworker or fellow student, and practice allowing the interviewer to finish asking a question before you answer.

Well-prepared departments that conduct panel interviews will include charge nurses, preceptors, and in some instances relatively new nurses to provide a well-rounded perspective. If that's not the case in your interview, it may indicate an unhealthy environment.

**Ask your own questions.** You'll be asked if you have any questions, so prepare at least three (one or two may be answered during the interview, so having several questions is a smart idea). Consider asking:

- What do you like about your role?
- What do you like about the organization?
- Can you tell me about growth opportunities? Does the organization offer a clinical ladder program?
- Can you describe the orientation process, including the length, preceptors, and expectations?

Listen for any statements that reveal disorganization or lack of support for new nurses. Warning signs should start flashing if the answer to your preceptor question is: "We generally see who's working on the days you work."

Questions about benefits are important to your

## Red flags

When you're assessing the work environment of a potential new employer, watch for these red flags.

- Interviewers avoid the question of nurse-patient ratio.
- You get a vague answer about how long orientation will be.
- During a unit tour, you observe conflict.
- The interviewers say their greatest challenge is getting out of work on time.
- Interviewers are silent or avoid answering your question about breaks.
- Staff comment about how much overtime they work.
- Interview panel members talk over each other or seem unprepared.

new role, but they should be asked of the human resources team.

**Follow up.** Before you leave the interview, ask for business cards or email addresses of each person who interviewed you. Follow up with an email or handwritten note thanking them for their time and the opportunity to learn about the position and department.

### Finding success

Navigating your way through prospective employers to identify a beneficial working environment can be stressful. Careful research and solid preparation can help you successfully transition to an HWE. ★

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Rehearse with a coworker or fellow student, and practice allowing the interviewer to finish asking a question before you answer.



# Make an effective transition to a new job

Success depends on collaborating with your orientation team and speaking up when you need help.

By Michelle Perregrini, MSN, RN-BC, CPAN, CAPA

**B**efore you started your new job, your employer gave you a snapshot of what your average day might look like, how preceptorship works, and some of the unit challenges. What you may not fully understand is that orientation can be stressful, and that you'll have a lot to learn in a limited time. So, be prepared. Your orientation success depends on collaborating with your onboarding team, asking questions, and speaking up for yourself.

## Information overload

During the first few weeks of orientation, you'll receive mountains of information. It will come



from human resources and leadership. And it will come during general nursing orientation in lectures on policies, procedures, skills, and standards of care. Then you'll be hit with your unit-specific education where you'll be exposed to a new environment, coworkers, preceptors, guidelines, and culture. (See *Preceptor match*.)

All of this information can be challenging and confusing, whether you're a novice or an experienced nurse. Novice nurses may feel insecure and lack confidence; experienced nurses may be unsettled by new policies and procedures. Don't assume that if you're an experienced nurse that your transition to a new organization will be easy. Prepare yourself to be thrown off balance as you learn new ways of performing familiar tasks.

## Addressing concerns

Over the course of your orientation, you'll be expected to meet medication safety, assessment, and demonstrated skills objectives. You may struggle to connect all the dots, or you may find that you can't recollect information your preceptor has told you several times. Does this mean that you aren't

## Preceptor match

Before your start date, your educator and nurse manager will match you with a preceptor based on several factors. Ideally, they will choose among nurses who have:

- completed a preceptor workshop
- expressed interest in preceptorship
- demonstrated unit-required skill competency.

The educator and nurse manager will then talk with these nurses to determine how they currently feel about precepting. Any who are overwhelmed in their current nursing duties or have a scheduling conflict won't make a good match.

In some cases, the educator and nurse manager will try to match nurses with similar backgrounds. For example, a former emergency department (ED) nurse who's now an experienced postanesthesia care unit (PACU) nurse will onboard a nurse who's transitioning from the ED to the PACU. The preceptor will have insight into the challenges of this transition and can help the new nurse navigate them.

## Follow the signs

When you identify signs of difficulty during your orientation, take steps to address them.

### Signs

### Next steps

I don't always understand what's happening, and I feel as if I should be "getting it" by now.

- Request a progress meeting with your educator/nurse manager. They'll provide private feedback to you and your preceptor.
- Keep in mind that not all nurses learn at the same pace. Your learning style is unique to you and adjustments can be made to meet your needs.

My preceptor is unapproachable/seems irritated when I ask the same questions again.

- Meet with your educator/nurse manager to discuss your concerns. You may need a new preceptor, which can be coordinated. Preceptors are taught to expect the possibility of a switch according to the orientee's learning needs.
- Review your progress with your educator/preceptor.

I can't seem to get any of my tasks or medication administrations completed on time.

- Review the medication administration policy and set timeframes for completion.
- Identify unfamiliar medications with your preceptor and review medication guidelines (e.g., infusion rates).
- Set timeframes to complete tasks, then follow up with your preceptor at the end of the day.
- Review your progress with your educator/preceptor.

I can't seem to get report right. I often forget vital information.

- Role-play giving and receiving reports with your preceptor.
- Follow the organization's handoff guidelines. One helpful format is SBAR—**s**ituation, **b**ackground, **a**ssessment, and **r**ecommendation.
- Add details to the report throughout your shift and keep it with you during handoff.

My preceptor is still very hands-on, and I'm nearing the end of orientation.

- Plan three goals at the beginning of your shift. Your first goal should be taking the lead in patient care, with your preceptor as your assistant.
- Follow up on all three goals at the end of the day.

progressing? Or are you overwhelmed? (See *Follow the signs*.)

Some new graduates experience so much anxiety and stress during their transition into a professional role that they leave the profession. You can take steps to navigate the stress and reduce your anxiety.

As you progress through orientation, you'll meet privately with your educator, preceptor, and unit nurse manager. These meetings, which should be supportive and collaborative, are great opportunities to discuss your performance and review your experience, assignments, and concerns. Don't be afraid to speak up if something isn't working. Maybe you and your preceptor aren't a good match. The only way to solve that problem and ensure that you're having the best learning experience is to communicate with the appropriate nurse leaders so they can help you.

### What happens if I don't "pass" orientation?

Your team of preceptors, educators, and nurse managers will explore alternatives to ensure your success. You might need to switch preceptors, ex-

tend your orientation, or explore units more applicable to your learning style and competence.

### What can I do to improve?

At the beginning of each shift, your preceptor will share the plan of the day. He or she also will ask how you think you're doing. This is a great opportunity to get immediate feedback during each shift, share your thoughts, and plan goals for the next shift. In between, research what you learned, ask questions, and be open to feedback.

### A note for preceptors

If you've signed up to be a preceptor, review orientation dates with your educator and nurse manager and let them know about any conflicts before agreeing to take on an orientee. Generally, two preceptors—a primary and secondary—are ideal for a well-rounded experience. The secondary preceptor fills in when the primary preceptor isn't available. Good communication between the two preceptors can go a long way toward meeting the orientee's learning needs. (See *Preceptor tips for orientation success*.)

## Preceptor tips for orientation success

If you're a preceptor, your orientee's success is your success. Use these tips to keep you both on the right track.

- **Get training.** Attend in-house nurse preceptor workshops or explore external conferences. Consider documentation training to help you review your orientee's documentation.
- **Share experiences.** Your orientees will appreciate seeing how far you've come.
- **Offer feedback.** Give frequent, honest feedback. Note the orientee's successes and identify areas for improvement. Provide specific examples.
- **Suggest journaling.** Encourage ori-

entees to keep a reflective journal (not for sharing) that they can look back on in 6 months to a year to see their progress.

- **Identify unit support.** Help orientees identify supportive colleagues. Remind them that each nurse has strengths in different areas and that teamwork is key during every shift.
- **Think aloud.** As you complete tasks, talk out loud. It will offer orientees an insight into each step of a process and show how you arrive at your clinical decisions or interventions.
- **Provide a tip of the day.** Share knowledge about a specific skill,

medication, or clinical fact that orientees can record in a notebook for later reference.

- **Speak up.** If you have concerns about an orientee, talk to your educator as soon as possible.
- **Collaborate.** Precepting is a collaborative experience. You have the support of your educators, clinical nurse specialists, and leadership—reach out to them when you feel overwhelmed.



### Team support

Collaboration with the nursing professional development team, preceptors, and the nurse manager is instrumental to facilitating your unique learning experience as you begin your new role. When challenges are detected early and the orientation plan is reassessed and adjusted, this team can help you meet your competencies while encouraging and supporting you. ★

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