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Leading with Appreciation: Celebrating Nurses Throughout the Year

Contributing Author: Holly Ma, DNP, MS, RN, NPJ-BC



National Nurses Week and National Nurses Day weren't always dedicated days of recognition in nursing. It took decades of advocacy to establish May 6th as National Nurses Day and subsequently, the week of May 6-12 as Nurses Week. Now, in May, coinciding with Florence Nightingale's birth, we celebrate and recognize the global contributions of nurses. Nurses Week serves as an important reminder of their critical role in healthcare, providing a platform for healthcare institutions, communities, and individuals to honor the tireless efforts and dedication of nurses.

Understanding what truly resonates with nurses during Nurses Week is a key

challenge for leadership to determine what type of celebration(s) would be meaningful for nurses. The desire for leaders to make nurses feel recognized, valued, and celebrated is universal, yet individual and personal preferences differ significantly. A scarcity of research exists on nurses' preferences to be celebrated during Nurses Week. One notable study indicated that nurses preferred educational opportunities over gifts and food (Hensinger, et al., 2008). A gift or snack can feel like tokenism versus value and recognition if not approached in a collaborative manner. Engaging staff at all levels in the planning process is likely to result in feelings of genuine appreciation.

Our hospital system utilizes a collaborative planning process for Nurses Week celebrations with a planning committee at both local hospital and system-wide levels. Each local hospital sends a representative to the system committee, ensuring a coordinated approach. Based on staff feedback, local hospitals host a variety of activities like snack and ice cream carts, games, magic shows, and appreciation displays. Each hospital hosts awards ceremonies, open to nominations, recognizing clinical excellence, preceptors, and support staff. Furthermore, some local nurse leaders' express appreciation through hand-written thank you notes to their team members.

At a system level, the committee plans a dedicated day of Nurses Week activities, designed to engage participation by every nurse across our organization. This includes diverse continuing professional development (NCPD) opportunities, both in-person and virtual alongside a special recognition luncheon honoring nurses with 40+ years of service in our organization. At the luncheon, senior leaders and supervisors honor these dedicated individuals. Additionally, an online "wall of thanks" posted on our intranet allows all caregivers to publicly express their appreciation.

True appreciation for nurses should

extend beyond Nurses Week, including recognition throughout the year. Our health system prioritizes recognition through a digital platform that allows leaders to award appreciation points and personalized messages to nurses who embody our core values. Additionally, all caregivers receive monthly points to distribute among their colleagues. Leaders also personalize their appreciation with birthday and holiday treats. We further celebrate nurses' accomplishments through regular intranet news posts. Local teams also highlight newly hired or newly certified nurses in their newsletters, huddles, and team meetings.

We encourage our patients and their families to recognize an exceptional nurse through the Daisy Award program. We promote the program with posters throughout the facility to help our nurses understand how their knowledge and

compassion make such a difference in our community. Patient and family members letters of gratitude are a testament to the impact of their care. Our Chief Operating Officer visits each hospital in our system to report the year in review, and shares patient letters. During Patient Experience Week, we established a tradition of calling nurses and other caregivers to a conference room to videotape their reactions as they read a patient's thank-you letter. Sharing these expressions of appreciation from our patients are deeply impactful, inspiring widespread admiration from all staff.

We expand our reach by utilizing social media to celebrate various nurse-specific recognition days (Certified Nurses Day, Neonatal Nurses Day, Wound Ostomy Care Nurses Day, etc.) and to provide "day in the life" glimpses of a critical care nurse. We also host a system wide

University Hospital Distinguished Nurse Awards ceremony, honoring outstanding nurses nominated for excellence in clinical practice, leadership, and research. Furthermore, our Nursing Research Conference showcases the innovative work of nurse researchers and highlights their impactful advancements in technology, processes and practice.

Awards ceremonies, gifts, and luncheons are nice, but in reality, many nurses want to hear a sincere "Thank you." Each of us has the ability to recognize one another and to reach out to a nurse you admire and say, "Thank you." ■

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