

The Importance of Giving Feedback in Nursing: Navigating the Challenges

Abstract:

Feedback is essential for professional development and quality improvement in nursing, promoting continuous learning, accountability, and enhanced patient care. Despite its importance, delivering difficult feedback poses challenges such as emotional discomfort, hierarchical barriers, and lack of training. Feedback helps nurses identify strengths and areas for improvement, ensures adherence to best practices for patient safety, and strengthens teamwork through transparency and trust.

Introduction

Feedback is an essential part of professional development and quality improvement in nursing (Peters et al. 2023). It promotes a culture of continuous learning and accountability, enhances patient care, and strengthens teamwork. Despite its importance, providing feedback, particularly when it is difficult or involves addressing negative behavior or performance, can be challenging for many nurses and healthcare leaders (Burgess et al. 2020). This article explores the importance of giving feedback in nursing, examines barriers to providing difficult feedback, and offers effective communication strategies.

The Role of Feedback in Nursing

Enhancing Professional Development

The quality of feedback is crucial for the professional growth of nurses as it helps individuals identify their strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a culture of self-reflection and continuous learning. Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, as it helps individuals understand their performance and guides them towards better practices (Mandouti & Hattie, 2023). In nursing, feedback from peers, supervisors, and patients can provide valuable insights that help develop clinical skills, critical thinking, and decision-making abilities (Burgess et al. 2020). For example, a nurse receiving feedback on their patient communication skills can learn to engage more effectively with patients, leading to improved patient experiences and outcomes. Additionally, feedback on technical skills, such as administering medications or using medical equipment, can help nurses refine their techniques and increase their competence in providing care.

Improving Patient Care

Effective feedback directly impacts patient care quality as it ensures nurses adhere to best practices, protocols, and standards of care (Vaismoradi et al. 2020). Feedback can highlight any potential issues, allowing for timely corrections enhancing patient safety and outcomes. Regular, constructive feedback improves clinical performance and patient satisfaction (Burgess et al 2020). For instance, feedback on hand hygiene practices can significantly reduce the incidence of hospital-acquired infections, which is directly beneficial for patient health. Additionally, feedback on patient assessment techniques can ensure that nurses are accurately identifying patient needs and providing appropriate interventions. This continuous improvement process helps maintain high care standards and promotes positive health outcomes.

Strengthening Teamwork and Communication

In the dynamic and often high-pressure healthcare environment, effective teamwork and communication are needed. Feedback is important in building and maintaining strong team dynamics as it promotes transparency, trust, and mutual respect among team members. When feedback is provided constructively, it can resolve conflicts, clarify roles and responsibilities, and strengthen collaboration (Hardavella et al., 2017). For example, interdisciplinary team meetings can improve coordination and reduce errors during patient handovers. By sharing observations and

insights, team members can address potential issues before they escalate, ensuring smoother transitions and continuity of care. Also, feedback can help identify communication breakdowns and provide solutions to enhance information flow among team members.

Overcoming Emotional Discomfort in Feedback

One of the primary barriers to giving difficult feedback is the emotional discomfort associated with delivering negative or corrective comments (Reddy et al. 2015). Nurses may be worried about their professional relationships, being perceived as harsh or unsupportive, or causing defensive reactions from colleagues. This discomfort can lead to a lack of feedback, which ultimately hinders its effectiveness (Hardavella et al., 2017). A nurse, for instance, may hesitate to correct a peer's incorrect technique for fear of causing resentment, even though addressing the issue is essential for patient safety. Furthermore, the emotional strain of providing such feedback can be exacerbated by the close-knit nature of many nursing teams, where personal and professional boundaries often overlap. This hesitation does not only affect the recipient's ability to improve, but also affects overall team performance and patient care (Gnepp et al. 2020).

To address emotional discomfort, nurses must approach feedback with empathy and a genuine desire to support their colleagues' growth (Yu et al 2022). Using "I" statements instead of "You" statements can reduce the perceived personal attack and foster a more collaborative approach. For example, saying "I noticed there were some incomplete entries in the patient records" is less confrontational than "You left them incomplete. This language shift helps frame the feedback as an observation rather than an accusation, making it easier for the recipient to accept and act on. Also, preparing for the feedback conversation by practicing what to say and anticipating reactions can help reduce anxiety. It is beneficial to begin the conversation by acknowledging the recipient's strengths and contributions, which can create a positive basis for discussing areas that need improvement. Active listening during the conversation ensures that the feedback is a two-way exchange, allowing the recipient to express their viewpoint and engage in a constructive dialogue.

Navigating Hierarchical Structures in Feedback

The hierarchical nature of healthcare environments can also impede the feedback process as nurses may feel intimidated or reluctant to provide feedback to those in higher positions, such as senior nurses or doctors, due to concerns about repercussions (Lee et al. 2021). Equally, those in leadership positions may struggle to provide feedback to junior members of staff due to fears of being authoritarian or disapproving. For instance, a junior nurse may notice a potential improvement in a senior nurse's approach to patient interaction, but hesitate to provide feedback, fearing negative consequences for their own career. Similarly, a nurse manager may avoid giving critical feedback to a team member, implying that it might decrease morale or lead to conflict. These hierarchical challenges create an environment where essential feedback is often ignored, preventing the organisation from attaining its full potential in terms of quality and safety.

The pursuit of hierarchical barriers requires the creation of a culture of mutual respect and openness. Leaders should seek feedback from all staff levels and show that it is valued and acted on (Crans et al 2022). Encouraging peer feedback and establishing mentorship programs can also facilitate the gap between different hierarchical levels (Goldsmith 2016). In a mentorship program, less experienced nurses can receive guidance and feedback from more experienced colleagues, fostering an environment of learning and mutual understanding. At the same level nurses provide feedback to each other, peer feedback systems, can also normalise the practice of giving and receiving feedback across all levels of the hierarchy. By embedding these practices into organisational culture, the fear of repercussions from providing feedback to higher-ups can be reduced, and a more open, communicative environment can be established.

Enhancing Feedback Training for Effective Communication

Nurses may lack formal training in providing effective feedback, which can result in poorly structured, vague, or overly critical feedback that does not provide clear guidance (Hardevella et al 2020). Training programs that focus on communication skills, emotional intelligence, and feedback techniques are essential to equip nurses with the tools they need to provide feedback efficiently (Khademi et al., 2021). Without such training, feedback may be given in a way that is too general to be actionable or too harsh, causing defensiveness and reducing its constructive value. For example, a nurse might tell a colleague their performance "needs improvement" without specifying what aspects require change, leaving them confused and demoralised. Alternatively, feedback that is too blunt may become a personal attack rather than helpful advice, resulting in strained relationships and a reluctance to engage in future feedback exchanges. Proper training helps nurses provide feedback that is specific, constructive, and supportive, fostering an environment of continuous improvement and professional development.

Investing in training programs focusing on feedback skills is essential. These programs should cover topics like effective communication, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence. Simulation-based training and role-playing exercises can provide nurses with practical knowledge and confidence in providing feedback. For instance, nurses can participate in situations where they practice giving and receiving feedback in a controlled, supportive environment, allowing them to refine their techniques and receive immediate, constructive feedback. Furthermore, ongoing professional development opportunities can ensure that feedback skills are continually improved (Mlambo et al., 2021). This might include workshops, seminars, and online courses offering advanced strategies for handling difficult feedback. Organisations can also establish regular refresher courses to enhance feedback skills and improve their performance. By continually investing in these skills development, nurses can become more adept at providing clear, constructive, and conducive feedback to professional growth.

Seeking Support for Feedback

For nurses who are new to giving or receiving feedback, seeking guidance from experienced colleagues, mentors, or supervisors can provide critical support (Song et al., 2024). Many healthcare organisations offer mentorship programs where less experienced nurses can learn from seasoned professionals, not only in clinical skills but also in effective communication and feedback techniques (Hardavella et al., 2020).

In addition to formal mentorship, peer support plays a crucial role. Engaging in open conversations with trusted colleagues can help alleviate anxiety about providing feedback and foster a culture of mutual feedback. Senior nurses or team leaders can share examples of how they manage difficult feedback situations and offer tips for navigating hierarchical challenges. For example, participating in simulation-based feedback training or group feedback sessions provides a practical, supportive space for nurses to practice these skills. Inviting colleagues to give feedback also promotes a collaborative and reflective environment, empowering team members to learn from one another (Gottlieb et al., 2021).

By reaching out to mentors, engaging with peers, and utilising available training resources, nurses can develop the skills and confidence necessary to give and receive feedback effectively. This proactive approach contributes to a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

Strategies for Effective Feedback

Creating a Supportive Environment

Creating a supportive environment is essential to the feedback process and involves fostering a culture where feedback is viewed as a valuable tool for growth rather than a punitive approach (Haskins & Roets 2022). Leaders can encourage open communication, demonstrate receptiveness to feedback themselves, and recognise the efforts of staff who provide constructive feedback. Establishing regular feedback sessions can reduce the anxiety associated with giving and receiving feedback (Burgess et al., 2020). For instance, a nurse manager might hold monthly meetings where staff are invited to share their experiences and feedback in a safe and supportive environment. Additionally, leaders can demonstrate positive feedback behavior by openly discussing their own areas for improvement and how they are working on them, thus fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Recognising and rewarding staff who actively participate in feedback processes can further promote a culture where feedback is seen as an integral part of professional development.

Using a Structured Approach

Structured feedback frameworks, such as the "SBI" (Situation-Behavior-Impact) model or the "SMART" (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) criteria (Doran 1981), can enhance feedback's clarity and effectiveness. The SBI model describes the specific situation, observed behavior, and its impact. This approach helps ensure that feedback is objective, focused and effective (McCutcheon & Duchemin, 2020). An example of using SBI within nurses could include, instead of saying, "You need to be more careful with patient documentation," a nurse could say, "During yesterday's shift (Situation), I noticed that you left out important details in the patient's chart (Behavior), which could lead to misunderstandings in their treatment plan (Impact). This specificity makes the feedback clear and actionable, allowing the recipient to understand precisely what needs to be changed and why. Using the SMART criteria can further enhance feedback by ensuring that goals for improvement are clear, achievable, and time-bound, enabling nurses to set realistic and achievable improvements plans.

Fostering Self-Reflection

Self-reflection can make the feedback process more collaborative and less confrontational. Asking open questions that prompt the individual to reflect on their performance can help them gain ideas and take ownership of their development (Koshy et al 2017). For instance, questions such as, "How do you think the shift went yesterday?" or "What challenges did you face during the procedure?" can lead to a more productive feedback discussion (Watling & Ginsburg, 2019). This approach allows nurses to assess their own strengths and areas for improvement before receiving external feedback, making them more receptive to suggestions. By promoting reflective practice, nurses can develop critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of their professional actions and results. Furthermore, self-reflection encourages a growth mindset, where individuals view feedback as an opportunity for learning rather than criticism.

Providing Balanced Feedback

Balanced feedback that includes both positive reinforcement and areas for improvement is more likely to be beneficial and effective (Gnepp et al 2020). Recognising and affirming strengths can enhance confidence and motivation, while constructive criticism can enhance effectiveness. Balanced feedback is associated with increased engagement and performance improvement (Gnepp et al. 2020). For example, feedback discussion can begin with acknowledging the excellent communication skills of a nurse with patients before addressing the need for more attention to detail in charting. This balanced approach helps to maintain the recipient's morale and motivation while providing clear guidance on how to improve their performance. It also demonstrates that the feedback provider is genuinely appreciative of the recipient's efforts, fostering a positive and constructive relationship. By providing balanced feedback, leaders can help staff develop a more rounded skill set and achieve higher level of professional competence.

Ensuring Timeliness

Timely feedback is crucial to its relevance and impact, as delayed feedback can reduce its effectiveness and may lead to missed opportunities for correction and learning (Imanipour et al., 2023). Providing feedback immediately after the observed behavior or event ensures that the details are fresh in both the giver's and receiver's minds, making the feedback more precise and actionable (Brookhart, 2017). However, it is important to choose an appropriate time when both parties can concentrate on the conversation without distractions. Providing feedback immediately after a busy shift may not be ideal if the recipient is exhausted or stressed. Instead, locating a quiet moment when both parties are relaxed and can engage in a thoughtful discussion will enhance the effectiveness of the feedback. Timely feedback also facilitates quick adjustments and improvements, which can lead to immediate benefits in patient care and team dynamics. Regularly scheduled feedback sessions can ensure feedback is timely and performance issues are addressed promptly.

Conclusion

Providing feedback, particularly when it is difficult, is an essential and challenging aspect of nursing practice. Effective feedback is essential for enhancing professional development, improving patient care, and enhancing teamwork within healthcare settings. Although delivering difficult feedback can be challenging, such as emotional discomfort, hierarchical barriers, and a lack of training, nurses can employ several strategies to navigate these obstacles effectively. Creating a supportive environment is essential, as fostering a culture where feedback is viewed as a tool for growth rather than a punitive approach encourages open communication and receptiveness. Using structured approaches, like the "SBI" model or the "SMART" criteria, ensures feedback is objective, focused, and actionable. Self-reflection by encouraging self-assessment before receiving external feedback makes the process more collaborative and more confrontational. Providing balanced feedback that includes both positive strengthening and areas for improvement maintains morale and motivation while guiding professional development. Ensure timely feedback delivery makes it more relevant and effective, but it is important to choose an appropriate time for discussions to avoid distractions. Finally, enhancing feedback training through formal programs covering effective communication, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence equips nurses with the necessary skills. By adopting these strategies, nurses can turn feedback into a powerful tool for continuous improvement and excellence in health care, contributing to high performance, better patient outcomes, and stronger, more cohesive teams.

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