

# Professional Development for Nurses

Professional development is all about continuous learning and education so that you, as a nurse, can provide the very best of health care services to your clients / patients.

Your professional development should NOT be random or ad hoc! Your learning should be planned, systematic and managed in such a way as to ensure that you always have the current knowledge and skills necessary to provide safe, caring and effective health care.

Here is a suggested six-step process that you can use to get the most from your individualized professional development program. These 6 steps are:

1. Identify
2. Prioritize
3. Plan
4. Do
5. Evaluate
6. Record

## Step 1: Identify your learning needs

This can be done in several ways. The first way is to reflect on your practice. In what areas of your practice do you feel unsure or uncomfortable? Do any of these areas have anything to do with client / patient health and safety? If they do, then you may want to focus your learning to upgrade these specific competencies.

Some nursing associations have created self-assessment forms based on their competency profile. This is a systematic and thorough approach to review all of the competencies that you require to be proficient. Using the self-assessment forms will identify any areas in which you may need refreshing or upgrading. (See our Self-Assessment Tools).

Tests and quizzes are ideal for testing your level of knowledge in various areas, and identifying those that you may need to brush up on. (See our Test and Quiz Center).

Another way to assess your learning needs is to get feedback from your supervisor and co-workers. Ask them what you do really well, and what you can improve. Your learning needs should be written down and reviewed annually.

### Step 2: Prioritize your learning needs

Once you have identified your learning needs, the next step is to prioritize them from most important to less important. Here are some criteria you can use. Is this learning need related to critical performance deficiencies that may affect client / patient safety? These learning needs should be given the highest priority.

Is this learning need related to my current work? Does this learning need reflect a skill deficiency in my team or unit? If it does, then it should be given a higher priority.

Does this learning need address competencies that I need to advance in my job or to change career direction? As a general rule, you should undertake learning activities to make you highly competent in your current job first ... and then take learning that allows you to expand and/or change your job or career.

### Step 3: Prepare a learning plan

Your learning or professional development plan will consist of a list of learning activities and tasks that you plan to undertake to address your learning needs. Each learning activity or task in your learning plan should contain the following information:

- A reference to the competency you want to improve
- The learning objective - WHAT you want to learn
- The learning task - HOW you plan to learn
- And a target completion date

Think of your learning plan as a blueprint or map. Keep your learning plan manageable - no more than 3 to 5 learning objectives each year. Also, it is perfectly acceptable to develop your learning plan for a multi-year period. You may wish to have to 3 or 5 year learning / professional development plan.

Your learning plan should be reviewed and updated every year . . . more frequently if your job responsibilities or career changes.

#### Step 4: Do the learning activities

Once you have your learning plan, the next step is to implement it ... or undertake the learning activities you said you would. There are many different ways to learn. Some common ones include:

- Taking a formal course, seminar or workshop
- Reviewing manuals or documents related to your work
- Attending professional conferences and conventions - these are very good to learn the latest trends and developments in your profession
- Independent study - this can include reading of books and trade publications, or using the Internet to do research and study.

#### Step 5: Evaluate your learning

At the completion of each learning activity, you should take some time to evaluate and document the effectiveness of this learning. Evaluation factors that you should consider include:

- Quality - was this learning experience poor, fair, good or excellent? Why?
- Learning needs met - how well were my learning needs met? Ideally, all your learning needs were met so that you can improve your practice. If not, then you will have to take additional learning activities ... not an efficient use of your time.
- Value - was this learning activity worth the time, effort and money I invested? Are there other learning activities that provide better value?
- Recommendation - would I recommend this learning activity to my professional colleagues?
- And comments and notes for future reference.

You should take time to make a written evaluation of each learning activity. This is valuable data for you, your colleagues, your nursing association and your employer.

#### Step 6: Record your learning

The final step in the learning process is to record each learning activity as it is completed. Data that should be recorded include:

Name of the learning activity with competency reference

Date the learning activity was completed

Results of the learning activity, e.g., grade achieved, certificate obtained, etc.

Any relevant comments for the record and future reference.

Following these six steps will help you keep your professional competencies current in the most effective and efficient manner.