Organizational culture in health care is a powerful driver of performance across measures of safety, quality and patient experience. Performance in each of these domains — individually and collectively — directly influences organizations’ ability to compete in today’s rapidly evolving health care marketplace.¹

Developing a strong, positive health care culture to optimize these critical interdependencies requires deliberate and consistent planning and action, as well as new collaborative models of leadership to guide the entire workforce toward a shared vision.

Establishing operational synergy between human resources and nursing leaders is especially necessary. As the largest segment of the health care workforce, nurses play a leading role in the transformation of care delivery. Yet the demand for nurses far outpaces the current and projected supply — an imbalance that is exacerbated by the fact that more people need care today than ever before as the population ages and as care becomes more complex.

This reality has important implications for nursing and HR leadership. Nurse leaders must find ways to ensure a positive and supportive work environment for all nurses in the face of resource limitations, and HR leaders are tasked with developing optimal strategies for recruiting — and retaining — qualified nurses from a shrinking pool of candidates.

Clearly, the challenges and priorities faced by both leadership groups overlap, and they reflect a shared goal: develop a qualified, engaged nurse workforce that is equipped to deliver safe, high-quality, patient-centered care (Figure 1). Yet, traditional operational structures mean that both groups frequently work independently, rather than together, toward that goal. This results in inefficiencies, considering the interconnectedness of performance in each area. When high-performing nurses feel supported and appreciated, they contribute to improved patient quality and reduced staff turnover, both of which help with future recruitment because job seekers want to join organizations that have good reputations as both care providers and employers.²

The robust data supporting this reciprocal, complementary relationship suggest that nursing and HR leaders will have a more powerful influence by joining forces rather than proceeding alone. By working together to achieve organizational goals, they strengthen their ability to navigate the complex challenges both teams face, improving the culture of the organization and, ultimately, the quality of care delivered to patients, families and the communities they serve.

Building this level of partnership requires integrating efforts from the ground up, including strategy, budget management, goal-setting, action planning and intervention. The following “first steps” are essential for forging this partnership.

1. **Align leadership stakeholders**

Senior executives — chief human resources officers and chief nursing officers — must lead the way. This requires that both create the space for an authentic partnership by listening to and learning from each other.

Some suggestions for building this leadership dyad include:
Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nursing Workforce Challenges</th>
<th>Aligned Workforce Priorities</th>
<th>Human Resources Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nurse recruitment</td>
<td>Talent acquisition</td>
<td>Human resources compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse retention</td>
<td>Employee retention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse engagement</td>
<td>Employee engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse compensation/skill mix/labor costs</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse safety</td>
<td>Employee safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate and appropriate staffing</td>
<td>Staffing, Development &amp; Culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic and external rewards and recognition</td>
<td>Competitive benefits and recognition programs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse/nurse leader relations</td>
<td>Employee relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse diversity and inclusion</td>
<td>Workforce diversity and inclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development and continuing education</td>
<td>Workforce training, education and development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership development</td>
<td>Career ladders for leadership development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse work environment</td>
<td>Organizational culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory compliance and nursing practice</td>
<td>Human resources compliance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Establishing a regular cadence for leadership team meetings to stay connected and coordinate activities;
- Developing an agenda that promotes cross-education;
- Attending leadership, staff or council meetings for each other’s departments;
- Seeking out opportunities to learn and lead as a dyad, such as joint rounding;
- Creating defined processes for nursing leadership and management education focusing on shared priorities, such as workforce planning, recruitment and staffing.

2. Use data strategically
Nursing and HR leaders should regularly review and discuss organizational performance on measures of workforce engagement (organization-wide and nurse specific), safety, quality and patient experience to identify patterns and understand the critical interdependencies. The leadership teams should use data to:

- Inform integrated improvement strategies and monitor progress;
- Report results and connect the dots so that clinicians, leaders and staff at all levels understand how their efforts contribute to the overarching vision for the organization;
- Understand the data dependencies associated with Magnet and other accreditation and regulatory requirements;
- Align action plans around improvement initiatives during regular leadership huddles and staff meetings to optimize communication across teams.

3. Link efforts to measurable outcomes
The best way for cross-functional stakeholders to drive toward a unifying goal is to establish shared key performance indicators (KPIs). Essential KPIs include:

- Nurse satisfaction and practice environment, measured using a validated survey instrument;
- Nurses’ intention to stay in their current position, which serves as a marker for job satisfaction;
- Nurse turnover — an important indicator of the job market and the work environment of the organization;
- Nursing-sensitive safety and quality outcomes, such as fall rates, bloodstream infections, and pressure injuries;
- Nursing-sensitive patient experience measures, including nurse communication, which has been identified as a rising tide measure for other critical outcomes, and care coordination, which has been shown to drive patient loyalty.

4. Insist on mutual accountability and ownership
Mutual accountability between HR and nursing leadership is essential for achieving the kind of performance gains needed to develop and sustain a strong, productive, positive nursing workforce. Even more important than accountability is a sense of ownership for the processes, operations and outcomes for which this dyad has oversight. This requires a commitment to data sharing and open and honest communication about needs. This can be facilitated by:

- Establishing a cross-functional team with representatives from both operational areas;
- Openly discussing hits and misses on both the HR and the nursing side as they relate to workforce culture;
- Developing workforce skills in relational coordination.

5. Integrate HR and nursing perspectives
Creating synergy between HR and nurse leaders requires a shared commitment to nurturing the relationship and specific processes to support it. Examples of strategies that can strengthen the nursing/HR partnership include:

- Involving nurse managers and clinical nurses early in the hiring process to help in the assessment
of new nurses’ values, attitudes and potential fit with their units;
• Collaborating on the design and implementation of programs to support engagement, such as pre-hire job shadowing and behavior-based interviewing;
• Developing onboarding programs that reflect the values of the organization and the mission to provide safe, high-quality, patient-centered care, while also meeting the needs of the workforce;
• Developing mentorship programs with input from clinical nurses to help smooth the transition for new nurses and integrate them into the organizational culture.

6. Lead by example
Successful leadership collaborations are models for the entire organization, and they create the expectation that direct reports will follow the leadership example. To increase the impact of the HR/nursing partnership, be vocal about the joint efforts and be transparent about what it entails and why it’s valuable. Some ways to achieve this include:
• Creating the space for cross-departmental meetings so that nurse and HR leaders can get to know each other;
• Modeling alignment and shared vision across leadership through storytelling and transparent communication;
• Providing nursing and HR business partners with frequent opportunities to offer input into best practices and discuss what they and their teams are doing internally and externally to drive results;
• Demonstrating commitment to the partnership by regularly communicating progress on shared goals and expectations;
• Celebrating hard work and successes by highlighting achievements and outcomes of the collaboration.

When human resources and nurse leaders commit to working together toward a shared vision, their ability to optimize the interdependencies between workforce engagement and care safety, quality and experience increases by an order of magnitude. Further, the trusting relationships they build when they collaborate as full partners positions them to positively influence nurse practice and policy, and move their organizations closer to the transformational goals.

Joseph Cabral is Chief Human Resources Officer, President, Workforce Solutions, Press Ganey Inc. Mary Jo Assi, DNP, RN, FNP-BC, NEA-BC, FAAN, is SVP Clinical Excellence Solutions and Associate Chief Nursing Officer, Press Ganey Inc.

Sources:

Satisfy multiple recognition needs with custom jewelry. Our designs will meet your budget and make your employees smile.

Custom jewelry... a brilliant idea!

info@eadion.com - 800-445-1007 - www.eadion.com
Working through our national network of independent distributors

This article originally appeared in the Winter 2018 issue of HR Pulse magazine, copyright ASHHRA of the AHA, 2018.