

Identifying and Engaging Key Support Roles for Successful Board Service

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Novice board members shouldn't ever feel like they are alone or without support in their new roles. Preceptors, mentors, coaches, and sponsors enable and encourage nurses as they prepare and pursue board opportunities. When these support systems are established, both sides of the professional relationship benefit and grow through the experience.

“Mentoring over the course of a career can take many forms — guiding, advising, protecting, focusing, sponsoring, challenging, coaching, facilitating, introducing, recommending, sharing, and so forth — with different needs emerging as a career unfolds.” (McBride, 2011., p. 65)

The path to success takes many forms and is not always straight. The journey to successful board service is no different. As with many aspects of leadership development, nurses who choose to share their time, talent, and treasure through service on boards are rarely fully prepared when they begin serving in these roles. The first step is to identify gaps in the nurse’s skills, knowledge, and experience to address this reality. This self-assessment enables the nurse to identify who might best support them along the way and model effective board service (Harper & Benson, 2022).

A Descriptive Model for Success

As a novice board member, there are often specific areas of content or competency in which one may need a more in-depth level of knowledge and/or experience to successfully fulfill their role. To better prepare and support nurses in these areas, the Nurses on Boards Coalition (NOBC) Preparation and Support Work Group created the NOBC Support Roles for Board Success (see Figure 1). This model demonstrates how nurses can assist other nurses bidirectionally. For example, seasoned

nurse board members often help prepare and support more novice nurses. Then – as their journey of board service continues – the novice nurses become the experts who, in turn, reach out to assist others who are new to board service. Additionally, the NOBC Support Roles for Board Success model outlines four distinct roles needed to prepare and support nurses for successful board membership and leadership:

- Preceptor.
- Mentor.
- Coach.
- Sponsor.

Novice nurse board members should reflect upon these distinct roles as they consider individuals who will support them on their board journey.

Preceptor Role

Most new nurse board members are paired with a seasoned board member assigned to serve as a preceptor. Like preceptorships within the clinical setting, a *board preceptor* is a content expert skilled in assessing needs, teaching specific tasks, and assisting in the development of essential competencies. This support role provides one-to-one, time-specific assistance to orient the new person to the role of a board member on a short-term basis. For example, if this is the nurse’s first board, a preceptor may provide an overview of how to make a motion and follow *Robert’s Rules of Order* at board meetings and board committees. The preceptor might also provide an overview of regulatory policies that directly impact the work of the board.

Mentor Role

Nurses serving as board members may also benefit from a mentor who can provide support on an ongoing basis. A mentor is a voluntary role created through a personal request to someone whom the nurse believes possesses the acumen, skills, and competencies they would like to emulate. The mentor is usually perceived as a trusted advisor. Mentorships are usually long-term relationships that deepen over time.

Thoughtful consideration should be given to a selection of a mentor. When seeking a mentor, nurses should consider people they know as well as others who may not be known to them. Most people are willing to help if they are asked and provided with a compelling case regarding why they are being sought to serve as a mentor. By selecting highly esteemed mentors, nurses set high standards for themselves and create conditions for successful board contributions and service.

After a mentor is selected, it is important to set realistic expectations for the time involved and determine how and when the nurse and mentor will work together. Because this is a longer-term commitment, the mentor and mentee should prioritize the topics they plan to cover first and then expand the discussion topics as progress is made and the relationship grows.

Supportive mentors help nurses develop an understanding of board dynamics, learn how to apply key competencies, and build confidence in their board roles. Each board presents unique challenges and opportunities. Mentors facilitate novice nurse acclimation to the culture of the board and introduction to board colleagues. Furthermore, a mentee may consult with their mentor to discuss unclear board topics or issues with full transparency and real-time learning.

Coach Role

Occasionally, a nurse board member needs competency development in a specific area. In this case, the nurse board member may seek out the counsel of a coach. The coach-coachee relationship employs goal-oriented, personal, and professional development for a specific competency. The coach, as often seen in sports,

serves as a skilled observer who can provide counsel on how to improve specific competency development, point out areas of concern, and guide the coachee to maintain personal accountability for their knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

Coaches are often engaged to address tangible and intangible characteristics, behaviors, and skills that impact the nurse's ability to contribute as a board member. To be most effective, the coach may request input from others to understand the real and perceived facilitators and barriers to achieving board effectiveness. The more specific the goals, the better the outcomes when engaging with a coach. Depending on the goals and outcomes that are mutually agreed upon, a coach may be engaged for a short term, such as 90 days – or longer – when deemed appropriate and beneficial. An example of such a relationship could be eliciting the assistance of another member of the same board to coach the new board member through an understanding of the various documents and forms that relate specifically to the financial aspects of the organization. This support would be time limited and end when the nurse is skilled and confident in that specific competency.

Sponsor Role

After a nurse has reached a high level of competency serving on boards, they are often noticed by a colleague who is well-connected and respected. In this case, the role of the sponsor may be employed. The sponsor serves as a door opener who can introduce and vouch for the less experienced nurse, often creating opportunities that could not be achieved without the sponsor's connections and reference.

The role of the sponsor is reserved for those few who truly embrace the role to advocate for a specific nurse. While it is typical for nurses to select their preceptor, mentor, and coach, it is more common for a sponsor to emerge on their path and volunteer to serve in this role. The sponsor role should not be taken lightly, as the reputation of the sponsor is tied directly to the success of the nurse they agree to sponsor. To be effective, the sponsor should have a deep understanding of the nurse's character,

competencies, and potential. Likewise, nurses who select their sponsor should verify the potential sponsor is completely supportive of them, personally cares about them, and is committed to their success.

Most can recall a time when someone tapped us on the shoulder to consider an opportunity we were not aware of and wouldn't have considered unless it was brought to our attention. A sponsor's role is to keep an eye out for and initiate opportunities that align with the skills, qualifications, interests, and passion of the nurse they are sponsoring. By identifying and connecting the nurse to unique opportunities, a sponsor can help a nurse achieve their highest potential as a board leader.

Considerations

Not all nurse board members will choose to engage every type of support role. Time frames for engaging support are unique to each situation. Some nurses enter their first board roles already demonstrating a high level of competency in certain areas. No two board journeys are exactly alike; therefore, the support needed for each nurse may vary. What is important, however, is that when seasoned nurses reach out to assist others, everyone wins. No nurse should ever feel alone or like they have no one to turn to for support. Only when nurses in support roles voluntarily assist – and novice board members readily agree to accept the assistance – can optimal outcomes for the organization be achieved.

Conclusion

In summary, all four support roles enable and encourage nurses as they prepare and pursue board opportunities. When support is provided, both nurses benefit and grow from the experience. Ultimately, the organization benefits from the voice of a well-prepared nurse serving on the board. More importantly, the entire community benefits from board decisions that

advocate for social change, health equity, and improvement in the social determinants of health for the population it serves (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). \$

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Editor's Note: To highlight the importance and benefits of nurses on boards, *Nursing Economic\$* is proud to partner with the Nurses on Boards Coalition in publishing the Nurses on Boards column. Also, listen to the *Nursing Economic\$* Podcast with Coalition leaders at www.nursingconomics.net

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