Nursing Perspectives: Transforming NICU Culture: The Power of Meaningful Recognition
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Abstract

Amazing care delivery happens in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) around the globe, 24/7. As you are reading this abstract, thousands of acts involving extraordinary nursing have occurred in NICUs (babies have been held by their parents for the first time, parents have been comforted and given hope for their child’s future, a few extra milliliters of a tube feeding were tolerated, and children were successfully weaned off ventilators). Behind each of these amazing acts are nurses who come together not only to deliver clinical excellence but also to create a NICU culture that turns fear and uncertainty into hope and optimism. Derived from the collective behaviors of staff, the culture of a NICU can also be influenced and shaped by recognizing the contributions nurses make every day. Research involving The DAISY Award (an acronym for “diseases attacking the immune system”), which recognizes nurses in a meaningful way for their extraordinary contributions, found that this type of acknowledgment benefits individuals, units, and organizations. This article explores the impact meaningful recognition can have on the NICU culture and how this type of feedback can be used to sustain healthy work environments.

The DAISY Foundation (an acronym for “diseases attacking the immune system”) was founded in 1999 by the family of J. Patrick Barnes, who died at age 33 of complications of the autoimmune disease idiopathic thrombocytopenic purpura. During Patrick’s 8-week hospitalization, his family was deeply touched by the care of his nurses, not only their clinical excellence but especially the compassion and sensitivity they brought to Patrick and his family. In gratitude to the nursing profession, they created The DAISY Award for Extraordinary Nurses to honor and celebrate the special things nurses do every day in all health-care settings. Today, The DAISY Award is celebrated in more than 1,600 facilities throughout the United States and in nine other countries (http://www.DAISYfoundation.org). This article links the concept of meaningful recognition as represented by The DAISY Award to the specific care provided by nurses working in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) and how such recognition can influence the culture of these units.

Entering a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), one’s senses are immediately stimulated by the sounds of infusion pumps and ventilators and the sight of the tiniest human beings surrounded by myriad tubes. Accompanying these sights and sounds are nurses engaged in the ongoing process of combining their clinical expertise with technology, not only to care clinically for these babies but also to deliver care that helps transform family members’ fear, anxiety, and apprehension to hope, optimism, and dreams of a bright future. Although a part of this transformation rests on how clinical expertise and technology are integrated into care delivery, the culture of the NICU also provides a strong influence on how family members perceive their experience and successfully cope with an unplanned hospitalization. The nature of a NICU culture, an environment where precious and vulnerable infants are entrusted by parents to the care of nurses, lays the foundation for lasting memories, emotional connections, and lifelong gratitude to occur.

Although clinical expertise and technology are key aspects of NICU care, the ability of a nurse to connect on an emotional level with family members is also critical to the child’s well-being. NICU cultures that actively promote the development of these types of relationships between nurses and their family members are more readily able to embrace healthy work environments. (1,2) NICUs that embrace and value healthy work environments are in a position to use employee emotional and professional well-being as strategies to have
a positive impact on the unit and organization’s culture, overall performance, and the patient experience. (3)

Healthy Work Environment and Organizational Culture
A key piece of a healthy work environment is the culture of an organization. An organizational culture is best described as the shared values of the workplace (what the organization deems important, what people believe regarding how work is accomplished, and the norms that guide how people go about completing their jobs). (4) Cultures are formed at the organizational level, as well as within individual units and can occur even between different shifts. The common thread among the cultural elements of shared values, beliefs, and norms is behavior. In other words, through our behaviors, we demonstrate our beliefs about our ability to have an impact on patients, families, and workplace. Our actions also convey what is important and valued by the organization and individual units. In turn, our behaviors demonstrate how committed we are to following the established and accepted care delivery norms within each individual unit, as well as throughout the entire organization.

Nurses often encounter cultural differences when they get pulled to another area. These differences include in-care delivery variations related to the age of the child and the nature of the illness/injury, but often more complex are the different cultural nuances that drive how the work gets accomplished in each area. A common example of the impact a culture can have on an individual unit involves how you and your coworkers deal with consistent supply and/or equipment shortages. The culture (norms, values, and beliefs) on your unit may deem taking supplies from other floors as an acceptable solution to deal with the shortage. In another unit, the lack of necessary equipment and supplies triggers a process in which supply levels are immediately re-evaluated and changed to meet patient and staff needs. In these examples, the culture drives the solutions that address supply and equipment shortages. Along with tangible items such as supplies and equipment, intangible acts such as feedback, team cohesion, and support from colleagues and leaders can also strongly influence our behaviors, beliefs, norms, values, and the health of our work environments. The impact teamwork, leadership support, and positive feedback have on creating and sustaining healthy work environments has been well documented. (1,3,5–8)

In 2005, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) released the standards of a healthy work environment; these included Skilled Communication, True Collaboration, Effective Decision Making, Authentic Leadership, Appropriate Staffing, and Meaningful Recognition. These standards provided evidence demonstrating the impact intangible cultural attributes can and do have on the health of one’s work environment. Much of the research exploring these standards has focused on the influence associated with leadership, collaboration, communication, decision-making, and staffing. Interestingly, less emphasis has been devoted to understanding the powerful influence of meaningful recognition. (7) Often mistaken for an “atta girl” or “atta boy” pat on the back, meaningful recognition goes much deeper than a “thank you” or “good job.” A powerful form of positive feedback, meaningful recognition acknowledges how a person’s actions affect the life of another, is relevant to the recipient, and is equivalent to his or her contribution. (9) In other words, meaningful recognition involves heartfelt feedback describing how a person made a difference in the lives of others and is delivered in a way that is meaningful to the recipient.

Studying the Power of Meaningful Recognition
One of the most powerful ways to influence a culture involves devising a feedback process that allows staff and families the opportunity to recognize all of the extraordinary nursing occurring in a unit and/or organization. (5,7,10) Currently, 1,630 health-care facilities use The DAISY Award as a vehicle to acknowledge in a meaningful way how extraordinary nursing positively shapes patient and family member experiences. Research involving the analysis of more than 2,000 patient, family, and colleague DAISY Award nominations, interviews with chief nurse leaders, and DAISY Award recipients from 20 hospitals across the country found that recognizing nurses in a meaningful way positively influenced honorees’ perceptions about their work, as well as the culture of their organization and team spirit within individual work areas. (7,11) Specifically, this research demonstrated that providing meaningful recognition can elevate the value of nursing, reconnect people with why they became nurses, nurture team spirit, increase one’s self-awareness of the impact they had on the lives of others, instill individual pride, and motivate extraordinary nursing. (7)

“She has helped us get through some tough times here and never fails to help us find the positives. We look forward to seeing her on her shifts and feel very comfortable leaving at night and know our precious daughters will be safe in her care.” —NICU parents

Along with the cultural and individual benefits, meaningful recognition processes such as The DAISY Award also serve as a continuous feedback mechanism devoted solely
to catching “all the right going on” in a unit and an organization. Feeding back to staff “all the right going on” reinforces these behaviors associated with extraordinary care. Recognizing extraordinary care in a meaningful way conveys that employee actions are valued. When people feel valued by their workplace and colleagues, they experience elevations in self-esteem and feel more committed to their work group and organizations. (5,6,8,12–18)

In the NICU, recognizing extraordinary nursing serves as a catalyst to creating and sustaining cultures in which trust and emotional connections, combined with clinical excellence, produce a robust outcome: premature infants growing into healthy babies. The intensity of gratitude connected to the cultural attributes consisting of trust, emotional connections, and clinical excellence is demonstrated in NICUs across the country where unit walls are lined with updated pictures of former patients, many of whom return, year after year, with their parents to recognize the staff for their extraordinary work.

“We are given a new being that has yet to have an essence. Every decision that we make, every action that we execute, will impact this new person’s destiny.” —NICU RN

Along with helping family members experience hope and enabling premature infants to grow into children with the potential of leading healthy lives, the NICU culture also serves as a role model for integrating family members into care delivery. The ability to consistently and successfully integrate and engage family members in the care of their child is one of the critical pieces associated with accountable care. Using feedback to acknowledge how NICU nurses help families cope with the situation, inspire them to learn how to care for their child with confidence, and alleviate fear reinforces nursing behaviors that promote the delivery of accountable care. Recognizing “all the right going on” also provides a “continuous stream” of real-time patient and family member feedback regarding how effective NICU nurses are in delivering accountable care.

“He works diligently to help parents learn what they need to know to take care of their babies at home, helping them overcome incredible obstacles such as illiteracy, language barriers, and limited resources with dealing with health and caring for their child.” —NICU nurse colleague

A “continuous stream” of “all the right going on” also allows NICUs to use meaningful recognition as a strategy to implement and measure effective accountable care practices. Empowering nurses to recognize the difference they make in the lives of those they serve and acknowledge their extraordinary behaviors reinforces a culture in which engaging families in the child’s care is the norm and a valued part of the NICU experience. Recognizing and celebrating “all the right going on” sustains cultural norms that guide nurses in helping families simultaneously grasp the reality of their situation, embrace optimism and hope, and gain the courage to actively engage in their child’s care. When new nurses and families enter a NICU with a culture that embraces a healthy work environment, they pick up on these cues and quickly learn that extraordinary is not only a practice but also “the way work is done” in the unit. Along with feedback from the families, NICU nurses working in units where meaningful recognition is firmly embedded in the culture routinely recognize “all the right going on” and acknowledge their colleagues’ contributions. When this recognition occurs, coworker nurturing becomes a normal part of the cultural NICU fabric, which strengthens workgroup connections, intensifies personal commitments to the unit, and increases both the frequency of experiencing personal pride in one’s work and elevation of one’s self-esteem. (7)

“She touched the family by her presence. Her gentle spirit, backed by her expertise, provided a sense of peace. We are honored to work with such a caring nurse who so generously shares her amazing gifts with her coworkers and patients.” —NICU RN colleague

The norms, values, and beliefs created by the staff influence how compassion and professionalism are combined with clinical excellence and integrated into care delivery. The “how” that encompasses nurse behaviors melded with cultural norms, beliefs, and values set the stage for emotional connections with family members and patients that often last a lifetime. These unique attributes of NICU cultures allow an environment to emerge in which dreams are restarted and initial sadness evolves into joy and hope as the nurses are able to convince families that whatever the future holds, they can and will rise to the challenges before them. Recognizing in a meaningful way “how” NICU nurses help families embrace these difficult situations can be used as a feedback mechanism to consistently reinforce a culture of extraordinary nursing.

“She went above and beyond with answering questions, comforting our concern, and by listening while we talked ourselves out of being scared” —NICU parents

Conclusions
Recognizing the extraordinary work of NICU nurses in a meaningful way creates a culture in which grief is transformed into encouragement, optimism, and engagement. Although this amazing transformation occurs daily in NICUs across the country, much of the feedback in
health-care revolves around what went wrong with a patient and/or their family, and performance improvement opportunities often focus on correcting “broken” processes. Although a robust performance improvement process is necessary, many health-care organizations would likely benefit from devoting time to study the minutia of “all the right going on.” At one of the most horrific times a parent can experience, NICU nurses use their tangible and intangible skills to help families rise above the fear and apprehension often experienced when a child is a NICU patient. This combination of clinical nursing excellence, care, genuine compassion, professionalism, an emotional connection, and contagious positive attitude helps devastated family members, who are often paralyzed by the unknown and unanticipated, become joyful, encouraged, and engaged in the care of their child. This remarkable transformation would likely benefit from a better understanding of the cultural influences associated with “all the right going on” and devising systems, technology, policies, and practices that allow “all the right” to flourish. Recognizing extraordinary nursing is a budget-neutral tool that reinforces and celebrates “all the right going on.” Combining meaningful recognition with the NICU nurses’ skills of engaging parents in care delivery and their clinical savvy is the perfect formula for ensuring that all patients, regardless of age, size, illness, or injury, and their family members are engaged recipients of accountable health-care.

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References
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