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Pathway to Excellence[®]: Are You Ready to Apply?

How an Organizational Assessment and Gap Analysis Can Help

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Pathway to Excellence Designation

The American Nurses Credentialing Center's Pathway to Excellence program recognizes healthcare organizations that have the essential elements of an ideal nursing practice environment. To earn Pathway designation, an organization must demonstrate that it has integrated 12 practice standards into its operating policies, procedures, and management structure. These standards focus on the workplace, a balanced lifestyle for nurses, and strategies that support nurses on the job. Organizations benefit from the Pathway application process, in which they collect the data and evidence to support the standards and validate their integration through an online nurse survey. But how do you know if you're ready to apply?

Getting Started: Completing the Self-Assessment

Conducting a self-assessment is a good first step to determine whether your organization meets the requirements for Pathway to Excellence designation. The process enables your organization to compare itself against the program's compulsory elements to measure your current state. For maximum benefit, be sure to answer all questions as honestly as possible.

Before you begin, it is important to identify key stakeholders to participate. They typically include the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO), nurse managers, and direct-care nurses. Also consider those who have an impact on the nursing work environment, such as representatives from Human Resources, Quality Management, Employee Health, and Infection Control, as well as nurse educators.

Be sure everyone understands the importance of communicating openly and honestly about the presence or absence of Pathway program requirements within the organization. If desired, complete a crosswalk between the Pathway to Excellence practice standards and the structures and processes you have in place.

The self-assessment is available online at:

www.nursecredentialing.org/Pathway/ApplicationProcess/OrganizationalSelfAssessment.aspx



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Identifying the Gaps

Results of the self-assessment should help your organization identify its strengths and weaknesses and determine where the gaps are. Be sure that all of the key stakeholders who participate in the self-assessment also analyze the results. Together, the team should decide whether or not the organization is ready to embark on the Pathway to Excellence journey. You may find that there are simply too many gaps between your current state and the practice standards. Or you may conclude that the structures and processes are in place to proceed.

If so, the next step is to complete a thorough gap analysis and develop action plans to fill those gaps. You can also begin to assemble a timeline to ensure that all of the necessary changes are fully developed and integrated before document submission.

It is vital to share results of the self-assessment and gap analysis with the entire organization so everyone understands the potential challenges ahead. Organizations that educate their staff about the Pathway to Excellence program standards are likely to experience greater participation and support.

Closing the Gaps

Many organizations tap into their existing governance structure to work on identified gaps. Others may need to form new task forces, depending on the issue. It is important to ensure that staff nurses are adequately represented on these teams and have a voice in the process.

Even though your organization may have the internal resources to complete all of its action plan items, external help is sometimes beneficial. Consider the expertise of consultants, other hospitals, or Pathway-designated organizations. Since they have successfully completed the designation journey, Pathway organizations are especially valuable. They might provide suggestions on how to implement an improved mentoring program, for example, or offer advice on ways to enhance staff nurse involvement in the decision-making process.

Closing identified gaps does more than simply boost your Pathway application. It will lead to improved organizational outcomes and processes that can help create a better working environment for your nursing staff and other disciplines, as well.

Making the Commitment

Applying for Pathway to Excellence designation is a significant commitment that requires three key elements:



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- *High-level oversight.* The CNO must provide overall management in collaboration with nurses from all levels and facilitate coordination with departments and teams as the application moves forward.
- *Realistic timeline.* The CNO and others must develop a comprehensive timeline with key dates, including gap analysis action plan completion, application completion, document submission, and Pathway to Excellence Nurse Survey completion. Be sure to allow enough time for each step of the process.
- *Realistic budget.* The organization must develop and implement a Pathway to Excellence budget, including fees, personnel time, document production, collating and printing (see below for more details), document copies, delivery charges, nurse survey completion, and potential celebration events. Be sure to factor in all necessary resources.

As you prepare for document submission, it is important to continually assess your timeline. Often the period between completing the application process and submitting documents is just a few months. But it's important to remain flexible, because many factors can disrupt even the most carefully considered plans.

One key item is collating and printing time. For some, this can take as long as *two to three weeks*. Be sure to factor this in and secure additional support staff to help with the final document preparation, if necessary.

To assist with oversight, many organizations appoint a Pathway Program Coordinator (PPC). This is usually a nurse with extensive knowledge of the organization who works closely with the CNO on all aspects of the application process. Key functions include participating in the self-assessment and gap analysis, developing and overseeing the timeline, educating leadership and staff, spearheading document preparation, collecting narrative data and supporting evidence, writing narratives, and keeping the organization engaged in the process.

For those considering the Pathway to Excellence journey, the initial self-assessment and gap analysis are powerful tools to determine what's really going on inside your organization. Findings offer the opportunity to not only create an excellent work environment for nurses but also achieve national recognition in the process.



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