

# Editorial



## Task-Oriented Nursing Care Through a Positive Lens

In nursing literature and in conversation, I frequently hear the term *task oriented* referred to in a negative manner. Task-oriented nursing may be assumed to preclude the provision of holistic patient care and the development of a therapeutic nurse-patient relationship. I suggest that we need nurses who are task oriented in acute and critical care. Task-oriented care can be an effective and efficient way to provide high-quality patient care. In this editorial, I explore the definition of *task oriented* and perceptions of task-oriented leadership and nursing, and reflect on how task-oriented nursing care may be viewed through a more positive lens.

### Definition

According to Dictionary.com, the term *task-oriented* was introduced in the mid-1990s in the education and workplace literature.<sup>1</sup> *Tasks* are defined broadly as a piece of work assigned to or expected of someone within their work role.<sup>2</sup> *Task-oriented* refers to a focus on completion of a specific task and is considered a measure of success.<sup>1</sup> This dictionary also notes that the terms *goal-oriented* and *task-oriented* are similar in meaning.

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doi:<https://doi.org/10.4037/ccn2023506>

### Task-Oriented Leadership

Task-oriented leadership is one of 11 recognized styles of successful leadership.<sup>3</sup> Comparisons are made between leaders who are task oriented versus leaders who are people oriented. Task-oriented leaders are praised for their focus on high productivity, efficiency, and time management as they work toward the greater objective of meeting company goals.<sup>3-5</sup> Leaders with this style may focus less on relationship building with their team and may need to be encouraged to promote people-oriented practices to care for and develop their teams to achieve success. Examples of famous and successful task-oriented leaders include Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, Sheryl Sandberg, the former COO of Facebook, and Bill Gates, the former CEO of Microsoft.<sup>3</sup>

### Task-Oriented Acute and Critical Care Nursing

In the nursing literature, task-oriented nurses are often perceived to be lacking communication skills with their patients and families.<sup>6,7</sup> Keith Carlson,<sup>8</sup> a nurse and holistic career coach, says that even though the nursing profession appears to be task oriented to outside observers, it also involves communication with patients, families, and colleagues.

According to Dr Patricia Benner, novice nurses may be especially task oriented during the first year of practice, as they develop professional competencies.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, new graduates are not the only nurses who meet criteria for the novice practice stage. Experienced nurses who transition from other specialties to acute and critical care settings may function as novices in

certain critical care competencies. Also, experienced nurses who are learning advanced level skills, such as continuous renal replacement therapy or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, may practice at the novice stage while they are developing competency.<sup>10</sup> Task-oriented nurses may rely on procedural steps and guidelines to direct their performance until they develop competency and gain experience.<sup>10</sup> Dr Benner asserts that coaching can help novice nurses develop experiential knowledge so they can recognize more comprehensive clinical situations.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of task-oriented nursing refers to a method of care delivery that places emphasis on completing specific tasks that are necessary for patient care. Examples of essential tasks in critical care include monitoring vital signs, medication administration, sterile procedures, and wound care. These tasks require knowledge and critical thinking skills, and although novice nurses may take additional time to process and complete these tasks, some of the tasks may be lifesaving for patients.

Task-oriented nursing can emerge in different situations or be an individual style of nursing. Task-oriented care can be a phase that novice nurses or those who are developing competencies will naturally go through. In this case, *task oriented* refers to the additional time and support that novice nurses require to perform certain aspects of their role. Experienced nurses who have achieved the necessary competencies in acute and critical care nursing may also be considered task oriented if they focus on productivity and efficiency compared with relationship building. This approach may be considered useful in a critical care setting where patients have complex care needs and require multiple interventions to be completed in a timely and coordinated manner. Although critical care nurses are expected to have competencies in clinical judgment, advocacy and moral agency, caring practices, collaboration, systems thinking, response to diversity, facilitation of learning, and clinical inquiry,<sup>12</sup> these attributes will not be represented equally by individual nurses. Like task-oriented leadership, task-oriented nursing may complement rather than replace a more holistic approach to patient care. It is essential to recognize that being task oriented is only one aspect of professional nursing care.

In today's work environment, it is increasingly difficult for nurses to find the time to perform non-task-related nursing care. Health care organizations

that cut nurse staffing to minimal levels for monetary gain threaten to extinguish the caring part of nursing care by leaving nurses only enough time to complete the required tasks during a typical shift. To preserve the essential aspect of nursing care that focuses on relationship building and communication, nursing time and nursing care need to be valued. If nurses want more than task-oriented nursing, we need to lobby to protect the time necessary for more holistic nursing care. Dr Kristen Choi says that although it may be ideal to make nursing more relational versus task oriented, it may not be possible when health care systems view nurses only as units to produce work.<sup>13</sup> Dr Choi also stated "If you care about 'healing the profession of nursing,' there must be system/policy change to fundamentally alter how we view, value, and compensate nursing labor."<sup>14</sup>

## Closing Thoughts

Before we discount task-oriented nursing care, we should pause to recognize that there are some positive attributes associated with this type of nursing. Task-oriented nursing may complement approaches that focus on more holistic nursing care. Being task focused is considered a necessary part of professional growth for our novice colleagues and for those learning new competencies. Also, being a task-oriented leader is considered a positive attribute in the business world.

In a healthy work environment, team members with diverse ways of thinking and doing are valued for the strengths they bring to the team.<sup>15</sup> I encourage nurses to embrace our task-oriented colleagues, while continuing to mentor and coach novice and experienced nurses who are learning new skills. Together, as part of a team, we can help each other to navigate the changing health care environment. **CCN**



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*The statements and opinions contained in this editorial are solely those of the Editor.*

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