

Advocacy Competencies

While every medical-surgical nurse is equipped with the expertise and experience to make them a valuable voice in many critical topics, that doesn't mean there are skills and competencies that need to be developed for maximum effectiveness.

Knowing the answer and shouting it out (even VERY loudly) rarely results in change on its own. The true power of advocacy comes when you can effectively:

- **Understand** the problem
- **Frame** the problem for others
- **Build** and **maintain** connections
- **Ask** for what you want/need
- **Follow through**

These skills apply equally whether you are talking with your manager, presenting to the CNO, or meeting with your state legislator.

Competency #1: Understanding a Problem

Effective advocacy begins with understanding the issue before proposing a solution. Strong advocates seek to understand *what* is happening, *why* it is happening, and *who* is affected.

Why It Matters

Many workplace and healthcare challenges have multiple contributing factors. Proposing solutions without fully understanding the problem can lead to ineffective or short-lived changes. Taking time to gather information builds credibility and helps ensure that advocacy efforts are focused on the root cause rather than symptoms.

Questions to Ask

- What exactly is happening and who is affected?
- What information or data supports that this is a recurring issue?
- What factors may be contributing to the problem?
- What impact does it have on patients, nurses, or the organization?

Example

Rather than saying "We're always short staffed."

Try: "Over the past month, our unit has frequently cared for high-acuity patients while experiencing more admissions and delayed discharges. Staff have reported missed meal breaks, delayed documentation, and impact on care."

Competency #2: Framing a Problem

Once you understand an issue, the next step is framing it in a way that resonates with your audience. Different stakeholders may care about different outcomes, so effective advocates tailor their message while remaining truthful and patient centered.

Why It Matters

The same issue can be framed in different ways depending on who is listening. Leaders, policymakers, and colleagues are often more receptive when they understand how an issue affects outcomes they are responsible for.

Effective framing can connect the issue to:

- Patient safety
- Quality of care
- Staff well-being and safety
- Operational efficiency
- Regulatory or accreditation standards
- Financial stewardship

Example:

Rather than saying “Our documentation system is frustrating.”

Try: “The current documentation process requires duplicate charting, reducing the time nurses can spend providing direct patient care and increasing opportunities for errors.”

The issue hasn’t changed, but the framing highlights why it matters.

Competency #3: Building & Maintaining Connections

Advocacy is built on relationships, not one-time conversations. Whether working with unit leaders, executives, legislators, or community partners, trust develops over time through respectful, consistent engagement.

Identifying the key stakeholders or experts who possess the knowledge, influence and authority to make a difference is the first step in knowing who to make connections with. And don’t forget that, for many topics, YOU are a key stakeholder with critical information others need to make the best decision possible. Be sure to use this to your advantage!

Why It Matters

People are more likely to seek out and act on input from individuals they know to be knowledgeable, reliable, and collaborative. Advocacy is often more successful when relationships or partnerships are established before an urgent issue arises.

Ways to build connections:

- Participating in committees or shared governance councils

- Attend town halls or listening sessions.
- Meet your elected officials before asking them to support specific legislation.
- Follow up after meetings with appreciation and additional information when appropriate.
- Stay engaged even when there isn't an immediate issue to address.

Competency #4: Asking for Action

The purpose of advocacy is to create positive changes. Effective advocates clearly state the action they are requesting rather than assuming others already know what they want.

Why It Matters

People may agree that a problem exists but still be unsure how to help. A specific request makes it easier for leaders and policymakers to respond.

Effective requests are:

- Clear, realistic, appropriate
- Action-oriented
- Measurable or observable

Examples:

- “Could we review our discharge workflow at the next staff meeting?”
- “I’d like to recommend a pilot project to evaluate this workflow change.”
- “I ask that you support legislation that strengthens workplace violence prevention.”
- “Please consider meeting with nurses from our community to learn more about the issue.”

Competency #5: Follow Through

Advocacy does not end when you send an email, attend a meeting, or make a request. Meaningful change often requires persistence. Following through demonstrates professionalism, builds trust, and increases the likelihood that your efforts will lead to meaningful action.

Why It Matters

Healthcare systems and public policy are complex and change rarely happens after a single conversation. Leaders are balancing competing priorities, and even well-supported ideas may take weeks or months to move forward.

Ways to follow through:

- Follow up on the data to confirm the action had the desired effect.
- Thank individuals for meeting with you or listening to your concerns.
- Send a brief follow-up email summarizing key discussion points and next steps.
- Provide additional evidence or resources if requested.
- Align on next steps

- Share updates with colleagues and celebrate progress, even if it is incremental.

Example:

A nurse identifies recurring delays in discharge due to inconsistent communication among members of the interdisciplinary team. Rather than raising the concern once and assuming someone else will address it, the nurse:

- Shares observations and supporting examples with the unit manager.
- Participates in a workgroup exploring discharge improvement strategies.
- Helps pilot a standardized interdisciplinary discharge huddle.
- Provides feedback on the pilot's effectiveness.
- Follow up to review outcomes and discuss additional improvements.

Although the process takes several months, the nurse's continued engagement contributes to a more efficient discharge process and improved patient flow.