Improving the Identification of Learning Needs

Identifying the learning needs of orientees is often oversimplified or overlooked by preceptors and orientees because they are anxious to begin the transition to new staff nurse. Preceptors often assume they know what the orientees need to learn. Although this is partly true, careful attention to a broader and more systematic approach can be helpful. The process of identifying learning needs should include an assessment of learning needs and identifying learning gaps.

A more thorough analysis of the learning process ensures the success of nursing orientation programs. This approach mimics the nursing process by starting with assessments and incorporating the assessments’ findings into the formulation of educational plans. However, assessments of learning needs may not always be sufficient. A more careful identification of actual learning gaps may prove beneficial. Therefore, a thorough analysis of learning needs should include both an assessment of learning needs and the identification of learning gaps.

References

Learning Analysis: Assessing Needs, Identifying Gaps

Preceptors use their knowledge of baseline skills and competencies to help identify learning gaps of orientees. Learning plans are formulated to eliminate learning gaps and improve performance or nurse orientees.

Analysis is a high level skill required by preceptors who should consider assessing their orientees’ learning needs as a first step in developing a learning plan. Equally important is identifying and overcoming learning gaps to achieve a desired set of competencies during the orientation of new nurses. The ultimate goal for each nurse is performance improvement and retention.

A learning needs analysis helps to more fully understand an individual’s learning needs and to determine the gap between an existing set of skills, knowledge and abilities, compared to those required of a new role. The gap is determined by identifying the differences between one set of skills, knowledge and abilities, and the set required to perform a specific task or job. Gaps vary among orientees, and these gaps most likely are situational and individualized. Because of this, nurse preceptors must be prepared to efficiently assess learning needs and identify learning gaps to complete a thorough learning needs analysis of all orientees.

An initial learning needs assessment involves reviewing past learning experiences, successes and struggles, school and clinical experiences, and work-related experiences. Further assessment may include discussions related to specific issues of concern for orientees and situations that provoke anxiety, as well as their perceived strengths and improvement areas.

Preceptors then help orientees identify where they are in terms of their skills, knowledge and abilities — not where they need to be or wish to be in a given role or job description. To identify learning gaps, preceptors must understand the skill set that is basic knowledge and the abilities that students or new orientees should already have. Because learning gaps may be difficult to identify, preceptors should be aware of clues and behaviors that may indicate a learning gap. Poor demonstration of critical thinking skills, hesitation in thinking or poor skills performance may suggest a learning gap. In addition, the inability to assume greater responsibility and independence are clues. Once gaps are identified, preceptors can facilitate meaningful learning experiences that build on orientees’ basic understanding of concepts and lead them to a deeper application of their knowledge base.

Ideally, a learning needs analysis takes place early in the orientation process and includes the global set of skills, knowledge and competencies required to perform the job. However, a more focused or directed analysis can be conducted at any time on a smaller scale to hone in on a particular skill or knowledge deficit.