In today’s complex health care environment, the collaboration of professionals affected by health care issues is perceived as a reasonable strategy for problem solving. Interprofessional (also called interdisciplinary) collaboration refers to the coordinated effort of two or more professions working jointly toward mutual goals with shared responsibility (Drotar, 2002). It represents more than referrals and the simple sharing of information between allied health care providers. Partnerships involving trust, support, and cooperation among individuals who have diverse, yet complimentary skills are imperative for true, productive collaboration. A literature review by D’Amour, Ferrada-Videla, San Martin-Rodriguez, and Beaulieu (2005) revealed that the concepts of sharing, partnership, power, interdependency, and process are all used commonly to define interprofessional collaboration. Nurses increasingly are being afforded opportunities to serve as integral contributors to these teams, but may have some hesitancies or doubts if this is their first experience with interdisciplinary teamwork. Six practical tips are provided to prepare nurses who are considering participation in these types of collaborations.

**Tip #1**

Carefully review the nature of the prospective collaborative task.

**Tip #2**

Careful self-analysis prior to commitment. Is the prospective task of interest, and do you feel enthusiastic about involvement? Lack of commitment, marginal interest in the work, or the coercion of participation can lessen the value that multiple perspectives should bring to a collaborative group. Do you have any negative behaviors that will constrain the work? DeMarco and Roberts (2003) observed that some nurses fear they lack knowledge or are powerless, and these traits could inhibit the ability of nurses to work as effective collaborators. Sirota (2007), however, suggested that working on interprofessional groups can actually serve to empower nurses and may improve nurse/physician relationships. The invitation thus can be viewed as an opportunity rather than a requirement; initial pessimism or negativity should be contained. Collaboration may be a chance to make a difference and grow professionally.

**Tip #3**

Investigate pragmatic considerations prior to agreeing to participate. Even if the collaborative assignment is perceived as useful and interesting, pragmatic issues can interfere. For example, difficulty may occur in scheduling meetings at mutually convenient times for representatives from diverse professions. Financial resources within the organization to assist with the work may be limited, or perhaps administrative support will be unavailable. These considered elements within the organizational environment represent conditions which can affect the success of the collaborative group just as much as the interactions of team members within the group (San Martin-Rodriguez, Beaulieu, D’Amour, & Ferrada-Videla, 2005). Will you be given time off work for the meetings? Is there support for your involvement from the nursing administration? How long is the anticipated commitment? It is best to ask these questions prior to agreeing to participate so concerns can be managed prospectively.
Tip #4

Review the principles of effective group behavior. Interprofessional collaboration is a type of group process; as with any group process, all members should be accepted and active participants, and power should be distributed evenly (Puetz & Shinn, 2002). However, an interprofessional group is heterogeneous in nature and includes greater range of diversity, opinions, and beliefs. You will want to anticipate being a partner in identifying the mission and goals, planning, and evaluation of the group task. By keeping an open mind, you will appreciate the enrichment gained from multiple perspectives. Because lack of knowledge of and respect for the expertise of other professions can be a barrier to successful collaboration on interdisciplinary teams, try to appreciate the point of view that will be expressed by others and be willing to compromise when necessary.

Tip #5

Determine if good leadership will be available to direct and encourage the diverse professions. Interprofessional conflict is common, especially in the developmental stages of a collaborative group (Davoli & Fine, 2004). However, strong leadership can keep the team focused on the task and help all members feel valued and invited to contribute. A good leader will influence the team members to accomplish the group goals. Leadership involves guiding, directing, teaching, and motivating the group to set and achieve goals (Sullivan, Decker, & Jamerson, 2005). Keep these abilities in mind if you have the opportunity to help select the group leader, or to critique the skills of a leader who has already been chosen.

Tip #6

Practice collaboration skills via collaborative endeavors with other nurses. Collaborations of nurses with other nurses helps nurses to collaborate better with other professionals. First, collaborations with professional peers afford the opportunity to ascertain perspectives of colleagues on different issues affecting the profession. The position of the peer group then may be presented more accurately in an interprofessional group. Second, they allow for practice with collaborative skills, such as being direct and confrontational in a group when indicated. The more opportunities that nurses have to practice collaboration, the stronger their collaborative skills become (Erickson, Hamilton, Jones, & Ditomassi, 2003). A group of professional peers offers a good environment to practice listening, self-expression, compromise, and debate. Whether received in continuing education seminars, staff meetings, or even non-professional settings with other nurses, the feedback from colleagues can help nurses develop the confidence to function more effectively in an interprofessional situation.

The success of interprofessional collaboration is crucial in a complex health care environment with increasingly more interdependencies among health professionals. The value of the nursing perspective is undeniable in collaborative planning for solutions to health care issues. Although many factors affect the success of the interprofessional collaboration in solving problems, the tips presented here can assist you in preparing to be a participant in the group. The next time you are asked to participate in an interprofessional collaboration, whether the group is formed to write standard care maps or to review the ethical nature of research proposals, you may answer the challenge to serve with a confident, “Yes!”

References


