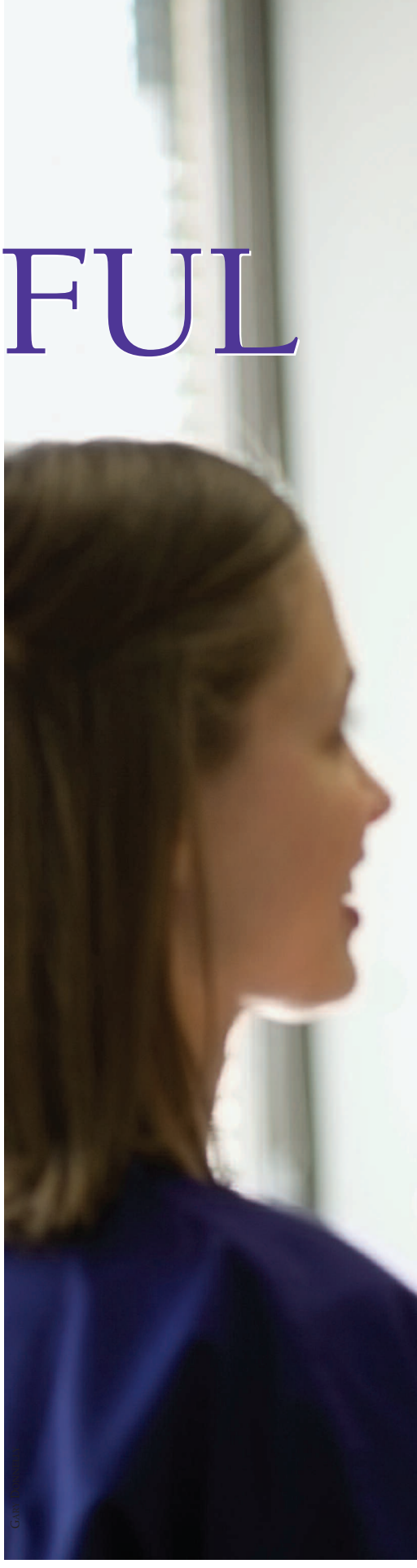
10 tips for SUCCESSFUL

By Carol J. Huston, MSN, DPA, FAAN



IT'S THE MAGIC MOMENT. You realize you can't possibly finish everything that needs to be done by the time it needs to be done. You feel overwhelmed because no matter how clear your priorities are, you can't meet the expectations placed on you.

Some people respond to this type of situation with a fight-or-flight response: Their pulse quickens, their pupils dilate, and they become flustered. Others become angry or resentful.

A more healthy and constructive reaction is to look at available options and take action. When you have too much to do and too little time, delegation isn't just an option; it's a necessity. In this article, I'll provide 10 tips for delegating appropriately and creating a win-win scenario for you and others on your team.

Delegation pros and cons

Delegation refers to giving someone else the authority to complete a task or action on your behalf. In other words, it's getting work done through others. Many nurses, particularly new graduates, may be reluctant to delegate because they worry that doing so will make them look less capable. Others feel everyone else is just as busy and delegating additional tasks only adds to their burden. Experienced nurses may resist delegating because they believe explaining what needs to be done takes longer than doing it themselves.

Although these concerns aren't unfounded, the reality is that delegation is an essential part of professional nursing practice. Delegation can help you achieve quality patient care, empower staff, and meet personal and organizational goals. The key to effective delegation is recognizing when to delegate and knowing how to do it wisely. These guidelines increase the likelihood that delegation will be both effective and rewarding for everyone involved.

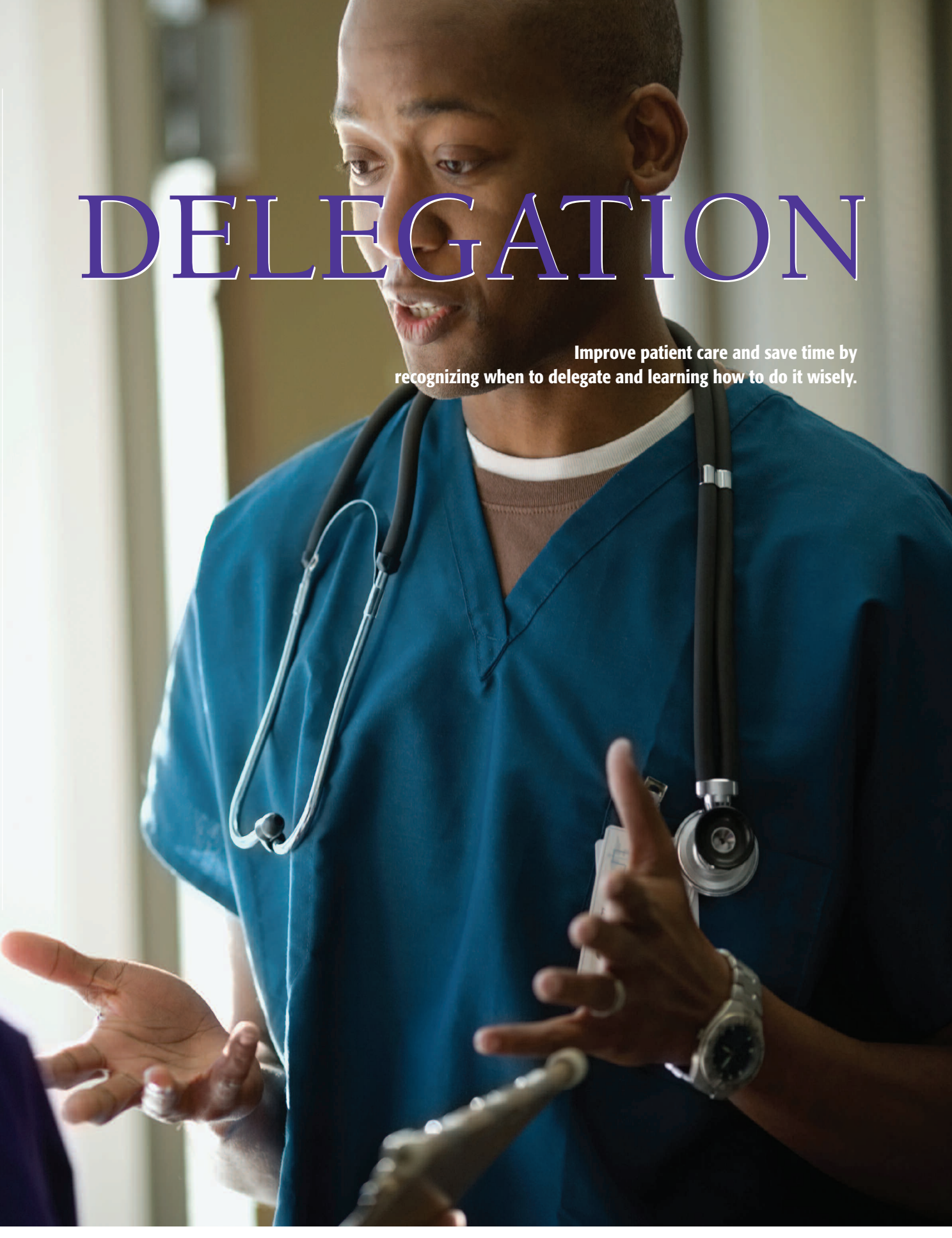
1. Delegate for the right reason. Delegating an unpleasant task simply because you don't want to do it is never appropriate. Neither is delegating simply because you're too disorganized to get your own work done or because you feel insecure in your own ability. Delegation should occur when someone else is better qualified to complete a task, when someone equally qualified has more time than you do to complete a task, or when delegating a task to an individual empowers her to achieve something she hasn't had an opportunity to do before. Used appropriately, delegation can be a powerful motivational and empowerment tool.

2. Delegate to the right person. Before you delegate a task to a team member or subordinate, know what she's capable of doing based on her job description and licensure, if appropriate. For example, make sure you know what tasks fall within the scope of practice for RNs and LPNs according to your state board of nursing and facility policies and procedures.

Also make sure the responsibility you wish to delegate is within the individual's personal skills and abilities. Team members differ in education, clinical experience, tolerance for autonomy, and problem-solving skills. This doesn't mean, however, that you should never delegate a task to someone who's never done it before.

DELEGATION

Improve patient care and save time by recognizing when to delegate and learning how to do it wisely.



Delegation gives team members opportunities to learn and develop and makes them feel trusted and valued. Just be sure to support someone accomplishing a delegated task for the first time by providing additional coaching, guidance, and supervision.

3. Delegate at the right time. In an ideal situation, the best time to delegate is *before* you become overwhelmed. Although crises happen that require you to reorganize your priorities, more often than not you can foresee hectic or challenging times. For example, waiting until the end of your shift to delegate the bed baths you didn't have time to finish is unfair to the person you're delegating to, and she's likely to resent your request.

4. Give others the right to refuse a delegated task and do the same yourself. Always ask the person you want to delegate to if she has time to help you and let her know what your time constraints are. For example, she might not be able to help you at that moment, but could pitch in if the task can wait 30 minutes. You can also negotiate by offering to help her later with a task in exchange for her help now.

But if she tells you she can't help you, respect her decision. You'd want the same respect in return if you needed to say no to another nurse's request.

5. Choose your words carefully. How you ask someone to take on a task influences whether she'll agree. Begin all requests for help with the word *please* and conclude with *thank you*. Point out why you're asking her to do the delegated task, particularly if you believe she could benefit. For example, you might tell a new nurse that inserting a nasogastric tube will not only help you, but it will also allow her to complete a mandatory skills checklist for new employees.

6. Don't create situations that require you to redo delegated tasks. If you delegate a task but fail to explain the level of quality expected, the result may not meet your expectations and you could find yourself redoing the task. Besides wasting time, this is demeaning to the individual you asked to do the task. If the task has specific time or quality demands, communicate them clearly and specifically at the outset.

What if the individual doesn't carry out a delegated task successfully? First, consider the possibility that the delegation itself was inappropriate. If this isn't the case, resist the impulse to take back the task even if you know you can do it faster or better. Instead, help her identify why the delegation failed and what other strategies may bring about the desired outcome. It may be as simple as giving her more direction about how the task could be accomplished or reassuring her that she's capable of accomplishing the task.

7. Define the desired outcome of the delegation, but allow latitude in how the delegated task is completed. In other words, be flexible. To delegate successfully, you must be willing to give up some control. The reality is that most delegated tasks can be accomplished in different ways and need not be done the same way each time. Delegation can allow subordinates or team members to be creative, to look at problems in a new way, or to take an innovative approach. It's important, however, that both the delegator and the individual accepting the delegation agree on the desired outcome as well as the timeline for the task to be completed. In other words, delegate "the big picture," not the process that must be used to complete the task.

8. Never delegate responsibility for a task without providing the authority and resources needed to accomplish that task. Although this requires you to give up some control, it empowers your team member to accomplish the task and sends a message that you trust her. Make sure she has the time, equipment, and other resources necessary to meet the challenge. Nothing is more frustrating to a creative and productive employee than not having the resources or authority to carry out the plan she's developed.

9. Oversee completion of the delegated task. Delegating a task doesn't mean you're no longer accountable. When delegation is successful, give credit to the person who took on the task. When delegation fails, however, you share responsibility.

The appropriate amount of supervision depends on the task and your team member's abilities. Some team members will need ongoing support and encouragement; others can work more autonomously with minimal guidance. In either case, when delegating a task, periodically seek feedback to assess if things are going smoothly and offer assistance as needed. This won't be perceived as hovering if you focus on providing help as needed, not on taking over or making sure the individual is "doing it right." Remember, it's easier to correct mistakes or redirect a team member before a delegated task is completed.

10. Celebrate successful completion of the delegated task. Everyone likes to be recognized for good work and contributing to shared goals. This recognition needn't be dramatic; a simple "thank you" to the person who accepted your delegated task may be enough. The more public your thank-you can be, however, the more likely your team member will be to assist you again in the future.

A win-win situation

Delegation is a skill that improves with practice. Following these simple guidelines will increase the likelihood that delegated tasks are completed and the process is fulfilling to both you and your colleagues. ✧

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