

Outcomes – Where Do I Find Them?

It's hard to look for outcomes when you don't know what you're looking for! Outcomes have to be planned – they give you a target, and then you can collect evidence to demonstrate that you've arrived at your destination.

Planning for Outcomes for Your Learning Activities

Determining outcomes for learning activities can only be done when you know *what* your learners need and *why* they need it. Conducting a thoughtful and specific needs assessment is the first step in this process. Needs assessments should be focused on the target audience for the learning activity. Think about these questions:

1. Why are you planning this activity?
2. Who do you expect to attend?
3. Why should they be there?

If the answer to #1 is that there's a great speaker who is available on Oct 1, you are planning an event around a speaker, not a learner need or desired outcome. It's better to start that process in reverse – think about the “why” before you think about the “who”. Maybe Dr. Mary Beth White is an expert on ethics, but that doesn't mean that your learners need or want to know about ethics. Besides, that field is so broad that it's almost impossible to focus the educational activity in a meaningful way.

Think about this scenario: Your hospital's critical care unit has had five cases in the past three months where families of patients had significant disagreements about who had the right to make decisions on behalf of a patient. This led to moral distress on the part of the nursing staff and frustration by physicians related to the delay in treatment of the patient. There are several possible opportunities here, so a thorough needs assessment will help you sort through the options.

- Option 1: a class on what the law says about the hierarchy of decision-making
- Option 2: a class on how to deal with moral distress
- Option 3: a class on the ethical implications of decision-making for patients and families
- Option 4: a class on effective communication strategies for supporting families in making difficult decisions about care for their loved one
- Option 5: no class – just clarify the policy and require everyone to follow it

How do you decide what is the best option?

- Option 1: Do staff not know the law (a gap in knowledge)? Will closing that gap make the situation better?
- Option 2: Do staff not have the ability to deal with these kinds of challenging situations (a gap in skill)? Will closing that gap make the situation better?

- Option 3: Do staff not understand ethics (a gap in knowledge)? Do they need information on patient rights, surrogate decision-making, and the concept of autonomy? Will closing that gap make the situation better?
- Option 4: Do staff not have the ability to collaboratively support families in the decision-making process (a gap in practice)? Will closing that gap make the situation better?
- Option 5: Is there an education-related issue here or not? Are ethical dilemmas amenable to policy/procedure standards?

Taking the time to get more information will help the educator think through the actual educational need. Several methods might be used to collect this needs assessment data. These include but are not limited to electronic survey of all nurses and physicians in the critical care unit, interviews with random staff on the unit, a focus group of nurses and physicians who were involved in the cases, and conversations with managers.

To follow this scenario further, a meeting ensued with administration, risk management, ethics consultants, and educators after a survey was taken of all nurses and physicians in critical care. Based on the survey results, there was agreement that the issue was not a gap in knowledge or skill – the issue was a gap in practice: the discomfort both nurses and physicians felt in collaboratively helping families navigate these difficult experiences. The best education, then, is option 4, and the desired outcome would be that nurses and physicians would work together effectively in helping families make decisions about care for their loved ones. The outcome is based on changing the earlier scenario: decreasing moral distress of the nurses and frustration of the physicians. We know that we cannot change the fact that these are difficult experiences for families – we CAN change how our staff members address those challenges in a way that will enhance the quality of care.

Let's go back to the earlier questions and answer them based on our needs assessment data:

1. Why are you planning this activity? The desired outcome is that nurses and physicians will work together effectively in helping families make decisions about care for their loved ones.
2. Who do you expect to attend? Nurses and physicians who work in critical care
3. Why should they be there? There is a practice gap in their ability to collaborate in supporting family members, as evidenced by the moral distress and frustration that have been expressed and the needs assessment data collected.

Now you are ready to develop your learning activity. You will plan an interactive session that includes such learning strategies as case studies, role play, or simulation to engage both nurses and physicians in learning opportunities that will lead to the desired outcome. You will be able to collect data about learners' behaviors during the session (process evaluation), their intent to change practice based on the education (product evaluation), and their actual integration of skills in practice (outcome evaluation).