



## Speak Up: Easier to Say than Do

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### Abstract

Hospitals are no strangers to mistakes and it is well known that errors occur regularly in United States hospitals. In understanding patient safety issues in the healthcare setting the Joint Commission determined that up to “80% of serious medical errors” relate back to communication. Nurses provide a large portion of care in hospital settings and as such are uniquely positioned to speak up when processes aren't followed or improper practices are observed with the potential to prevent errors. In light of the fact that communication is such a significant factor in medical errors, one can understand the importance of a healthcare industry where speaking up is the norm. By supporting the expectation that nurses speak up, organizations can improve patient safety. Factors such as leaders who are good role models and organizations that reward speaking up can be built upon to strengthen a hospital's culture of safety. Starting a conversation in organizations about the practice of speaking up is needed to end silence in hospitals to help prevent useless loss of function, life, and healthcare dollars.

**Keywords:** Speak up; Patient safety; Culture of safety; High reliability

### Speak Up: Easier to Say than Do

Have you ever made a mistake? Perhaps you put the milk carton in the pantry or accidentally backed out of the garage with the door down. Hospitals are no strangers to mistakes either. In fact, it is well known that errors occur regularly in United States hospitals which can lead to patient harm and unnecessary financial costs borne by our healthcare system. Some hospitals looking to change their safety portrait are working to institute practices of highly reliable organizations who function with “near-perfect safety” [1-3]. A hallmark of high reliability is not only that workers report all concerns but that they feel an obligation to do so [3]. This has been referred to as speaking up, where one voices a safety concern to bring attention to it [3-5].

Nurses who provide a large portion of care in hospital settings are uniquely positioned to adopt the practice of communicating concerns to prevent potential errors and patient harm. The practice of nurses in the acute care hospital setting speaking out, pointing out, and reporting incorrect care is known to effect patient safety [5,6]. In the current hospital setting challenges remain for nursing staff, and the clear expectation to speak up has yet to be consistently realized [4,7].

### Speaking Up in Society

Sometimes it may feel as though staying silent is easier than speaking up. It may even prevent struggles in home, professional, and social settings. But what if the context of what you need to say relates to something that is truly wrong. In an amateur experiment, a boy was recorded on the cold streets of New York acting as though he were homeless [8]. For two hours the boys remained in the cold with a torn shirt, no shoes, and shivering as people walked by with their new purchases, warm coats, and potentially full wallets without ever offering assistance.

The Department of Homeland Security recognized the need for voicing concerns and began the campaign “If You See Something, Say Something TM” to encourage airport patrons to alert officials of suspicious activity [9]. Recognizing that the average airline traveler hesitates or remains silent when information with the potential to save lives could be shared was a critical acknowledgement. Understanding that hesitations exist in society when speaking up is warranted, allows one to see how this phenomenon can translate to the healthcare setting.

### Impact on Patient Safety

The Institute of Medicine report [10] estimated 98,000 Americans died annually as a result of medical error. More recently James [11] concluded that preventable patient deaths in the US healthcare system was more than double that, somewhere between 210,000 and 400,000 patients each year. In understanding patient safety issues in the healthcare setting the Joint Commission determined that up to “80% of serious medical errors” relate back to communication [2]. Other studies have shown that the nurse's willingness to speak up has an effect on both patient safety and quality of care [5]. In light of the fact that communication is such a significant factor in medical errors, the importance of a healthcare industry where speaking up is the norm is understood.

### Factors that Impact Nurses Speaking Up

The role of nurse as patient and family advocate is a concept ingrained early and speaking up is a function of this expectation. Reid and Bromiley [12] identify nurse speaking up as “integral to professional accountability” (p. 6). Garon [4] states that the nursing profession's ability to communicate concerns is essential to them being effective. Maxfield, et al. [5] found that less than 30 percent of nurses verbalize concerns in an effective way. Hence, the nurse's ability to speak up in the healthcare setting is paramount to properly functioning in the fundamental role as advocate. While the expectation is clear it does not make the principle a reality and inquiry has been

done to determine what factors impact speaking up. The following sections will address the role leadership, the organization, and culture can have on verbalization of concerns.

### Role of leader

Garon [4] used focus groups to study speaking up in nursing, and found that the “most powerful influence on nurse’s speaking up was the nurse manager” (p. 9). In the study nurses reported that positive communication was fostered by managers openness and their ability to create an environment that allowed staff to be heard [4]. Aligning with this, Landau [13] studied employee voice using a quantitative design and found the tendency was positively related to having a good voice manager, someone who is open to listening to employees. Literature also supports the need for leaders to serve as role models [5,6]. Leaders must be aware of how they can help create a culture where speaking up is commonplace. They need to take heed that their behavior, willingness to listen, and communication skills can directly impact staff willingness to share concerns. In addition, leaders can communicate with their staff about this issue. Ask them if they are comfortable speaking up and why they feel that way. The discussion can be a mechanism to identify gaps and strengths to make enhancements where they are needed.

### Role of the organization

Literature has shown the importance of individual leaders in speaking up, but the role of the organization as a whole holds similar importance. Wong and Cummings [14] shared that nurses should feel safe at work, be provided an environment that allows them to speak openly, and do so without fear of retaliation from the organization. Centers for Medicaid Services, the major US regulatory body in healthcare, states that hospitals need to provide a culture that not only accepts but encourages staff to raise concerns [15]. Maxfield et al. [5], goes even further by charging organizations with rewarding those who speak up and including it in performance evaluations. Furthermore these authors instruct organizations to provide training on communication and role playing opportunities to combat silence [5].

### Role of culture

Another angle regularly mentioned in literature is the establishment of a safety culture, where the organization commits to a preoccupation with safety. Maxfield et al. [5] states that a culture of safety is where “people speak up effectively when they have concerns” (2010, p. 10). Literature also defines a safety culture as one “where people who know of or strongly suspect risks do speak up, even when they encounter resistance” [5]. Singer et al. [16] identifies a safety culture as a major component of ensuring “high reliability in hazardous industries” (p. 2001). The article goes on to say that this type of culture requires senior management to be involved in patient safety and to both hold knowledge of safety issues and take action on them [16]. Garon [4] mimics this notion when discussing that administration is key in promoting organizational culture. Hospitals can listen to, act on, and reward those who speak up to establish an infrastructure that supports verbalization of concerns by nurses.

## Start a Conversation

Even with the availability of new medications, advanced technologies, and skilled practitioners, the healthcare system lacks in its ability to provide safe patient care. By upholding the expectation that nurses speak up, organizations can improve patient safety. Factors such as leaders who are good role models and organizations that reward speaking up can be built upon to strengthen a hospital’s culture of safety. Take this opportunity to reflect on where your workplace is with supporting speaking up and identify any gaps. Start a conversation in your organization about the practice of speaking up. Ending silence in hospitals needs to be a priority to help prevent loss of function, life, and healthcare dollars.

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