Beating the nursing shortage

Boost recruitment, retention efforts with a systematic approach

If you want to enhance retention at your facility, spend time identifying the specific causes of employee turnover, says to Dennis Sherrod, EdD, RN.

Taking that first step will better prepare you to create a strong workplace environment for employees, he says.

As the inaugural Forsyth Medical Center Distinguished Chair of Recruitment and Retention at Winston-Salem (NC) State University and a former employee at the North Carolina Center for Nursing (NCCN), Sherrod is no stranger to the challenges of the nursing shortage.

To be effective, he says, managers must fully dedicate themselves to maintaining high staff satisfaction.

“A piece of your time has to be spent caring for the caregivers, and your supervisors need to support you in this,” he says.

As a first step, Sherrod recommends that managers develop a systematic process for collecting feedback. In addition to giving periodic staff satisfaction surveys, he also suggests the following:

Exit interviews
Some departing employees may not feel comfortable speaking with their direct supervisors during such interviews. Sherrod suggests that uncomfortable employees meet instead with someone from human resources, so that management can fully understand the employee’s real reasons for leaving.

Some hospitals may even find success in letting departing employees use a computer system to record their responses to sensitive interviews. Sherrod suggests that uncomfortable employees meet instead with someone from human resources, so that management can fully understand the employee’s real reasons for leaving.

Happy Holidays from all of us at SFNM.
questions. Managers can then review results in private.

Focus groups
Take a random sample of staff members to participate in a staff satisfaction focus group, recommends Sherrod.

Include questions regarding the following issues:

- Workload
- Staffing flexibility
- Compensation
- Continuing education
- Nurse-physician relations

As an extra draw, order in a meal or snacks for participants to enjoy during the meeting.

Retaining and recruiting RNs and LPNs
Once they have identified the causes of unit turnover, says Sherrod, managers must formulate specific strategies to address these issues. Many facilities have decided to give a variety of creative benefits and bonuses to staff, he says.

Sherrod understands why many hospitals have decided to give out sign-on bonuses to new recruits, but he says he doesn’t fully support the strategy.

“I don’t think sign-on bonuses are the way to go,” he says. “I’d really rather see people invest in a retention bonus. We have to find benefits that provide value to the people we serve.”

From his work at the NCCN, Sherrod says North Carolina hospitals have found success with the following strategies for staff retention:

- Competitive wages, strong pay scale
- Opportunity for decision-making, participation and input
- Flexible scheduling, control over shifts
- Good, flexible benefits
- Continuing education, professional practice development opportunities
- Recognition programs
- Bonus programs

Many of the same efforts apply to recruitment as well, says Sherrod. “Retention is really your best recruitment strategy,” he says.

Another key strategy is word-of-mouth promotion of your hospital’s reputation, adds Sherrod.

As a male, he also believes that nursing must make a special effort to reach out to men. “Sometimes we do get a little flowery in nursing,” he jokes.

“We’ve got to find a way to make nursing inclusive, to be equally interesting to all populations.”

He encourages administrators to notice the small things as well as the big picture. For example, when making recruitment brochures, pick a gender-neutral color instead of a pink or teal, he suggests. 

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Get a copy of Strategies for Nurse Managers for each of the nurse managers in your facility at a discounted rate! Call Dell Bobier toll free at 866/464-2776 to find out how.
Health care executive Jeff Doucette, RN, MS, CEN, CHE, CNAA, says his philosophy on health care is often unpopular with his staff—he believes that hospital employees “run hotels for sick people.”

Patients, says Doucette, have the same expectations as hotel guests. Managers should seriously consider patients’ comfort needs, because, unlike hotel guests who usually spend an 8-hour night in bed, hospital guests lie in bed all day. Doucette, executive director of patient care and customer service at Lee Memorial Health System in Fort Myers, FL, encourages managers to look at the following features in their facility:

**Bathroom items.** Many toothbrushes provided by hospitals are flimsy and bend, says Doucette. The brush is often rough and makes the gums bleed. Doucette’s hospital used to offer one bottle of generic soap that was, according to the label, good for “washing the hair, face, and body.” When Doucette tried the product, he says it left him feeling sticky and greasy.

**Pillows.** Many facilities use thin pillows that Doucette says make a crunching noise when you lie on them. He says it doesn’t make sense to save five cents per pillow by purchasing cheap pillows, when you have to use several on patients’ beds.

**Food.** Managers might not realize that employees do not get the same food as patients, says Doucette. He encourages nurse managers to sample patients’ food. If a manager thinks a change is needed, he says, he or she should invite the facility’s chief executive officer to lunch. Bring a patient tray for the meal and see what changes, he says.

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**Fellowship opportunity**

The National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR), part of the National Institutes of Health, offers grants to nursing professionals interested in nursing-based research. Applicable research involves clinical care in a variety of settings, including the home and the community, as well as more traditional health care sites. The NINR’s research extends to problems encountered by patients, families, and caregivers. The Institute’s 2003 areas of research opportunity include the following:

**Behavioral Changes and Interventions**
- Enhancing Adolescent Health Promotion Across Multiple High-Risk-Behaviors

**Chronic Illnesses or Conditions**
- Long-Term Care Recipients: Health Care Needs and Interventions

**Responding to Compelling Public Health Concerns**
- Community-Partnered Interventions to Eliminate Health Disparities
- End of Life: Bridging Life and Death

The NINR also supports career development programs and comprehensive research training to prepare individuals to conduct nursing research in an interdisciplinary setting. For more information, go to [www.nih.gov/ninr](http://www.nih.gov/ninr).
Effective feedback can promote an active learning environment for your staff

By Kimberly A. McNally, MN, RN

Providing effective feedback is one of the most important contributions a nurse manager can make to staff development. Without effective feedback, staff members can fall off-track, feel unnoticed, lose excitement for the work, or become stuck in potentially unproductive patterns.

Effective feedback helps staff to focus on critical goals, and provides a framework by which managers can hold employees accountable for their work. Offering timely feedback on day-to-day events is a great way to create an active learning environment on the patient care unit. Managers who deliver effective feedback communicate clear expectations, and recognize employees for meeting performance goals. Consider the following tips on how to provide effective feedback to staff:

- **Give and receive with care.** Treat feedback as a gift to someone. When you give it carelessly, you may do more harm than good.
- **Ask to be invited.** It’s courteous to check to see whether a nurse is receptive to feedback, and doing so will increase the person’s ability to productively use the feedback. Ask, “May I give you some feedback now?”
- **Make feedback easy to receive.** Highlight the constructive nature of the feedback; and let staff know this is way for you to help them improve the skills that they already possess. Describe behavior on a continuum, “I’d like you to do more of or less of . . .”
- **Deliver small doses.** Give just enough information for the other person to digest. Remember—no dumping!
- **Remember that feedback comes in different forms.** Be aware of your nonverbal messages. Be sure to align your verbal and nonverbal communication. Otherwise, staff members will tune into your nonverbal behavior alone.
- **Check to see whether feedback is clear.** You are responsible for making sure your feedback is clear. Give employees an opportunity to respond to your feedback. Ask, “Does this make sense to you?” or “What questions do you have about what I’ve shared with you?”

Editor’s note: McNally is president of McNally & Associates, a leadership coaching and consulting company serving the health care industry. She coaches health care leaders and works with organizations to create a coaching culture.

Kentucky hospital accommodates older nurses

Administrator at Norton Healthcare, Inc., work hard to keep older nurses on staff and at the bedside. They allow nurses at the Louisville, KY–based facility 50 years of age or older to work fewer hours per pay period so these employees can spend quality time with grandchildren and family.

The facility also provides its employees with a great deal of flexibility in scheduling by offering staff members shifts of four, eight, 10, and 12 hours, and a no-weekends program.

Hospital administrators are also considering creating an academic-style work schedule for employees that would allow nurses to take summers off.

Health care’s core types must work together

By Sharon Seivert

Common solutions to the nursing shortage range from offering nurses better hours to increasing their pay. There is one theory, however, that many managers have yet to address—the notion that archetypal patterns, innate human instincts that prescribe individual and organizational human behavior, play a dominant role in fostering a workplace imbalance. Some experts in the career coaching fields subscribe to what’s known as Core Types, the idea that we all carry within us 10 colorful “characters” that influence our lives and interactions with others. In health care, they’re known as the “Caregiver” and the “Warrior,” and they’re at war for the soul of health care.

The Caregiver. This part of us wants to do good for others by calming a patient or holding the hand of a man who is dying alone. Caregivers often forget to include themselves in the loop of care, however. This can lead to the loss of big dollars in any business. But alas, in rides the Warrior to the rescue.

The Warrior. This Core Type knows how to whip people and things into shape. In recent years, health care’s Warrior-hero has become the manager who institutes changes to save the health care institution from bankruptcy. During the last decade, the Caregiver has given off many warning signals—many have resigned as a result of Warrior-imposed cost-controls such as less staff and increased hours. Since the Warrior and Caregiver work from such different scripts, these signals have gone unnoticed, though.

The solution. Helping these one-dimensional archetypes to learn about each other and benefit from each other’s wisdom, is key. Alone, neither one holds the answer. When these Core Types combine their strengths, they can provide us with the answers we so desperately need to remedy today’s health care crises.


Improving the work environment

A successful work environments may lower your staff members’ stress

Employees who work in a supportive environment report higher job satisfaction and increased morale. Such employees may also find that their stress levels have gone down. According to the Gallup Organization’s review of 25 years of data, 12 key elements indicate a strong workplace. Employees in successful work environments

1. know what administrators expect
2. have the needed materials and equipment
3. have the opportunity to use their talents each day
4. have received recognition or praise for good work during last seven days
5. have someone at work that cares at a personal level
6. have someone on the job that encourages their personal development
7. feel their opinions count
8. feel that their work is important to the organization’s mission/purpose
9. have coworkers that are committed to doing quality work
10. have a best friend at work
11. have talked with someone about their own progress during the last six months
12. have had opportunities to both learn and grow

Information management

Simple suggestions help to cut down on email time

How many e-mails do you receive in a day? Some managers admit their inbox has grown out of control. You too may find yourself overwhelmed with the constant influx of electronic information on the job. Follow these tips to help limit the amount of time you spend online.

1. **Utilize folders.** Most e-mail programs allow you to sort your mail into folders and even subfolders. Sorting messages this way can make finding messages much easier.

2. **Create rules.** Most systems allow users to automatically sort e-mail as it comes in. You can specify where a message ends up based on a set of criteria you establish such as the sender's e-mail address or the message content.

3. **Cut, copy, and paste.** Using these features will help you to minimize the time you spend typing emails. Perhaps you have a question about a section of a report you’ve been working on. By opening the report on your computer and copying the paragraph in question into your e-mail, you can save valuable time.

4. **Customize your email program.** Most people only use 20%–30% of their e-mail program’s capability. Set aside some time to learn more of your program’s features.

If you’re unsure of how to take advantage of all your e-mail program options, consult your facility’s IT department for assistance. They will be more than willing to help.


Teamwork

Identify team players during new hire interviews

If you ask an applicant whether he or she is a team player, the answer you receive will almost always be “yes.”

If you want to assess whether a nurse is truly comfortable sharing the load, ask the candidate to describe a previous team accomplishment and listen carefully to the response.

Does the nurse discuss each member’s contribution, or focus solely on his or her own individual achievements? In relating the story, does the applicant concentrate on “we” or “I”? The way in which nurses tell their story can help you to gauge whether they will truly become strong team players.


Save the Date!

Contemporary Forum’s “Leadership Excellence: Challenges in Nursing Management,” will take place in Miami, FL, February 20–22, 2003. Conference participants will learn about innovative solutions to managerial problems faced each day on the unit.

Topics include family-centered care, staffing models, legal accountability of managers, team building, budgeting, and unit design. For more program information, go to www.contemporaryforums.com.
Managing across four generations—the new management challenge

By Sue Fitzsimmons

As the current work force ages and new, younger recruits enter the nursing field, learning to work with the variety of generations in the health care labor force becomes a crucial part of the job for nurse managers. Increasing evidence suggests that the newest group of employees, the “Millenials,” “Nexters,” or “Generation Y,” may pose significant challenges for management. Understanding what drives this new group of workers will help leaders to positively engage members of the new generation in their work environment, thereby preventing conflict and fostering teamwork.

According to Neil Howe, economist and co-author of Millenials Rising: The Next Generation, the Nexters are very self-confident and expect a highly structured, “me-oriented” environment. At work, they expect clear, concise directions, detailed career plans complete with timely advancements, a high starting salary, and good benefits.

Bruce Tulgan, author of Winning the Talent Wars, says being a part of a team is important to members of this group—they have been trained to think collaboratively. Experts on this generation believe organizations may have to rethink individual rewards in favor of team-based rewards. The group as a whole is also enthusiastic about learning. Managers must therefore present jobs in terms of what nurses can learn from the experience.

Tulgan and Carolyn A. Martin, authors of Managing Generation X, have identified 14 Nexter expectations. Think about how you can incorporate these tenets into your management toolbox. Managers should

1. provide work that really matters
2. balance clearly delegated assignments with freedom and flexibility
3. offer increasing responsibility as a reward for accomplishments
4. spend time getting to know staff members
5. provide ongoing training and learning opportunities
6. establish mentor relationships
7. create a comfortable, low-stress environment
8. allow some flexibility in scheduling
9. focus on work, but be personable
10. balance the roles of boss with team player
11. treat Generation Y members as colleagues, not as interns
12. be respectful, and you will call forth respect in return
13. consistently provide constructive feedback
14. reward Generation Y members when they have done a good job.
Hospital awards staff for perfect attendance

At Morrow County Hospital in Mt. Gilead, OH, administrators offer a special incentive to help reduce the number of employees calling in sick when they want time off from the unit.

Angela Fry, RN, a staff nurse at the facility, says nurses who do not call in sick within a three-month period receive a $50 incentive bonus.

The program has proven successful and helped to solve staffing concerns. “It’s cut down on people calling off as frequently,” she says.

Solving the shortage

NHS tackles the nursing shortage in the UK

The health system in the United Kingdom differs greatly from that in the United States: The English health care system is a politically dominated, national system. But hospitals here are also feeling the effects of the nursing shortage, says Judy Hargadon, director of new ways of working at the National Health Service (NHS) modernisation agency.

Hargadon, who is also human resources (HR) director of the Department of Health, leads up the Changing Workforce Programme, a team whose goal is to modernize the NHS workforce, the largest employer of health care workers in the United Kingdom. She spoke during Boston University’s “Labor pains: The Nursing Shortage Crisis,” a recent conference organized by the Department of Maternal and Child Health at Boston University’s School of Public Health, and the Boston-based Center for Maternity Nursing Leadership Education. Hargadon says her agency’s HR strategy includes two simple catch phrases—“more staff” and “working differently.” The NHS has looked at the following areas to help improve recruitment and retention, according to Hargadon:

Flexible scheduling. NHS is committed to developing a family-friendly environment, says Hargadon. Administrators should not focus efforts solely on women, though, she says. For women to be able to work full time, their partners need flexibility in scheduling as well, she adds.

Reducing “handoffs.” Some patients report that multiple employees ask them the exact same questions within a short period of time, says Hargadon. To lower the number of handoffs, the agency is looking at specifying exactly who does and asks what, she says.

New terminologies. The term “technician” seems to be more attractive to youths, especially males, than the current title, “health care assistant,” says Hargadon. Using the word “technician” also better reflects today’s health care system, she says, as facilities are starting to rely more and more on technology.

Downplaying titles and credentials. While credentials are important, many times they may cause staff members to form inaccurate opinions about each other based solely on past experience, says Hargadon.

For example, if a nurse had a bad experience in the past with a physical therapist in the facility, that nurse may liken other therapists to the former, placing the employee “in a box.” NHS employees therefore no longer include all of their credentials on their name-tag, says Hargadon.

Common learning. Classes on topics such as communication and ethics, held for a variety of health care students—nurses, physicians etc.—would help employees learn to work together early on, says Hargadon. In this way they should learn that they are “not a very different species,” she says.

Employee incentives

Hospital awards staff for perfect attendance

At Morrow County Hospital in Mt. Gilead, OH, administrators offer a special incentive to help reduce the number of employees calling in sick when they want time off from the unit.

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MO hospital awards staff for patient safety strategies

At Missouri Baptist Medical Center in St. Louis, managers can trade patient safety improvement ideas for cash—up to $5,000 depending on how good the idea is.

The hospital’s newly established patient safety council selects the winners for this contest, which is designed to help improve safety at the facility. The committee awards cash prizes, ranging from $100 to $5,000, to staff members who come up with innovative ideas to for safety improvements.

Getting the community involved
The highest award the council has given out thus far was $1,000 for a community outreach program called “Mind Your Meds,” a program designed to get the community involved in patient safety.

Because medication mix-ups and adverse drug reactions are so common, Missouri Baptist designed a brochure with a tear-off, wallet-sized card that patients can use to keep track of the medications, over-the-counter treatments, and herbal treatments they are using. They carry the card with them and can present it to physicians to prevent potentially serious drug interactions. So far, the medical center has handed out more than 40,000 brochures.

Administrators’ efforts have started to change culture and improve safety at the medical center, according Missouri Baptist officials.

And the medical center has made progress—so much in fact that its efforts were recently rewarded with the American Hospital Association’s Quest for Quality Prize, co-sponsored by the McKesson Corporation. The award included $75,000, to be used to further advance patient safety initiatives.

Editors note: Learn how to achieve breakthrough reductions in medical errors by attending The Greeley Company’s Patient Safety and Medical Error Reduction seminar in Boston April 3–4, 2003. This program, presented by Dr. Robert Marder, Hugh Greeley, and Kerry Johnson, is designed to help you move your patient safety program to the next level.

The seminar is also approved for 10 Cat. I CME, 12 nursing contact hours and 9.75 CE hours for CPHQ recertification. For more information and to register, call Angela Simpson at 800/801-6661 and reference source code MT8084, or visit our Web site at www.greeley.com/seminars.

Nurses who work together as a cohesive team feel more invested in their work environment, and are happier, according to experts. In traditional work groups, employees may feel reluctant to correct a colleague’s mistakes or to report inappropriate behavior—no one likes a tattletale.

In a team setting, however, all staff members are equally invested in the organization’s work. In such a setting, it’s expected that workers will check each other. Team members will also be more likely to correct problems before they become critical.


Share with Strategies!
Do you have a special tip to tell your fellow nurse managers. Let Strategies for Nurse Managers know how you handled a sticky situation. If your tip is published, you will be entered into a drawing for a $50 prize. E-mail Associate Editor Debbie Blumberg at dblumberg@hcpro.com or call 781/639-1872, ext. 3425.
Kimberly A. McNally, MN, RN, responds to your coaching concerns

Question: I’m a nurse manager who will assume leadership for a second patient-care unit. The former manager is a nice person, but the unit has a reputation for turnover and strained team relationships. She has opted to take the early retirement package, and her position will not be replaced. My vice president has expressed confidence in my ability to turn things around. I’m not as confident. What do I do first?

Answer: First of all, congratulations on being awarded increased responsibility. Although you have a lot of work ahead of you, this is a significant career opportunity. Reflect on your personal values and how these translate into your vision for leadership and show up in your leadership style.

For the first few months, focus primarily on building relationships and understanding the unit’s culture. Let staff members know that you plan to assess the unit’s strengths and weaknesses, and that you’ll need their help. Plan to meet with every staff person individually for 30 minutes to introduce yourself and gather data. Include key physicians and other allied health team members as well.

Develop a script so that you have a consistent message. Describe your values, leadership style, and basic expectations. Use a structured questionnaire to elicit feedback on what’s working and what’s not working. Ask for possible solutions and gauge your staff members’ level of commitment to work toward improvement.

After you complete the interviews, collate the responses so you have an aggregate picture. Look for trends and patterns to the responses. Like an archaeologist, you’re on a quest to understand the history and the relationships that create the unit’s culture as it is today. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Who are the informal leaders?
- How are decisions made?
- What are the norms and mechanisms for communication?
- What behaviors are rewarded and punished?

With your increased responsibility, it will be important to delegate as much work as possible on both units. Use this time as an opportunity to groom other leaders. Also, take care of yourself, so that you have the resilience and energy to take on this new challenge.

Editor’s note: McNally is president of McNally & Associates, a Seattle, WA–based leadership coaching and consulting company serving the health care industry. She coaches health care leaders and works with organizations to create a coaching culture.

If you have a question for the coach, please e-mail dblumberg@hcpro.com or fax your question to 781/639-2982.

Rewarding staff

Luxury items present an extra incentive

One California facility offers attractive luxury perks to those nurses who agree to work an extra shift. Such nurses at Pasadena’s Huntington Hospital have the chance to win a night at a five-star Ritz Carlton Hotel, or dinner for two at a nearby “swank” restaurant. Those staff members who work one extra shift per pay period are eligible to participate in the rewards drawing. Administrators hold luxury item drawings twice each month. Executives call this luxury reward program the “Nurse Reward Program” and fund all prizes through community donations.

Case study

What to do when employee jokes are aimed at you

Problem: As a new nurse manager, you have had a busy first few weeks on the job. Everyone is still smiling, welcoming you onto the unit, and telling you how great of a job you’re doing.

A few days later, one of your staff members starts to offhandedly tease you with sarcastic comments. When you forget to follow up on a small problem, she says, “Well, our old manager had a photographic memory!” She follows this up by saying “I’m just kidding! Where’s your sense of humor?”

Solution: The wise manager should not become defensive or retaliate. Instead, you should work to understand this individual’s motives. Something is obviously troubling the nurse. By shrouding her concerns in a joke, the staff member may feel that she has maintained personal safety and can avoid responsibility.

Ask the nurse to tell you what specifically is bothering her. Say, “What did you mean when you were shaking your head and frowning a second ago?” or “What did you mean by telling me that your previous manager had a photographic memory?”

Let the employee know how you interpreted her comment and how it made you feel. For example, “Hearing you say that your other manager had a photographic memory made me feel like you were attacking my ability to remember.”

By responding in such a way, you will give this employee, as well as the rest of your staff, the message that you will confront those nurses who want to complain without taking personal responsibility. -

Feeling at home is key to new staff retention

An employee orientation is much like an invitation to spend a weekend at an acquaintance’s house, says Les McKeown, president and chief executive officer of Deliver The Promise, a Tiburon, CA–based consulting firm.

While attendees need to know where the bathrooms are located and where they will be staying, they won’t feel at home until they know how to communicate with everyone, how they can contribute, and that they are truly a part of the group, says McKeown. Feeling at home, he says, is one of the keys to employee retention. He suggests the following steps to help administrators create an orientation program that provides employees with an “at-home” feeling:

- **Highlight how new hires will add value to the facility.** Explain to new nurses how their jobs interact with other positions, and what effect they will have on the rest of the organization. Reassure new staff members that you hired them for more than just their core skills. Let them know what “extra” skills they possess that you really like.

- **Open up the lines of communication.** Use the orientation period to lock in and align goals. Encourage new staff members to talk about why they accepted the job offer and what they hope to gain from the position. Remember, a successful orientation is a two-way dialogue.


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When health care executive Jeff Doucette, RN, MS, CEN, CHE, CNA, injured his back this past year, he wound up nervous and frightened in the operating room.

Doucette, a nursing professional with over 15 years of both bedside and managerial experience, says that this experience helped him to see firsthand the excellent care provided by busy staff nurses each and every day. “I really believe you find caring and compassion where you least expect it,” says Doucette, executive director of patient care and customer service at Lee Memorial Health System in Fort Meyers, FL.

Small gestures mean big results in patient satisfaction

Lying on the operating room table, in pain and alone, Doucette noticed a nurse in the back corner of the room who was laying out the instruments for his surgery. She could tell that he was worried, Doucette says. So she approached him, took his hand, looked him in the eye and told him, “Everything is going to be okay. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“She’s the last person I saw when I went to sleep and she was the first person I saw when I woke up,” he says. “She was able to put aside what was a critical responsibility to tend to what was probably even more important—the emotional needs of the patient.” Several other nurses also helped Doucette have a positive experience in the following ways:

• One staff member helped to fulfill Doucette’s desire to see a priest before his surgery
• Another nurse spent an extra 45 minutes after her shift with Doucette and his wife, waiting out the delay in his surgery
• Yet another nurse in recovery found time to rub his back with a wet washcloth to help lessen the pain

Doucette says he greatly appreciated these small efforts made by staff. “I think so many times, as clinicians, we forget it’s really the little things that make a huge difference for our patients,” he says.
Compassionate care

“Our patients aren’t asking us to be absolutely primo in technology or know every nursing journal that’s ever been published. They want us to listen and respond to their needs, whether that is emotional or physical.”

Nurses should feel comfortable responding to their patients in such a way and should remember that thoughtful efforts don’t have to eat up your time, Doucette says. “It doesn’t mean you have to sit down with someone for 15 minutes,” he says.

“It’s sharing information, it’s having a good appearance, it’s being confident when you’re in the room, it’s sitting down when you talk to your patient rather than standing up.”

Gestures, such as a gentle touch on the hand or a comforting word, won’t take much time but can mean the world to a patient, he adds. Nurses should identify what works for them and make it part of their everyday routine.

Such compassionate care may also make a staff nurse’s job easier, he says. “When you go out of your way to make somebody feel good or do something nice, it typically makes your job a whole lot easier in the long run—people are less demanding, they’re calmer, and they’re more compliant with their care.”

Breaking down the barriers to more compassionate care

Doucette has seen nurses with one of two barriers to more compassionate care. Some do not understand exactly what a patient wants because they don’t ask, he says. Some patients may want their hand held, while other patients may not want to be touched. Other employees simply may not feel comfortable providing that level of service, or don’t realize that they’re not providing it, he adds.

“People think, ‘I’m a great nurse. I’m compassionate,’ but if you tape record what they say to patients and they listen to it, half the time [employees] can’t believe it’s actually them saying those things,” he says.

Nurses are many times rushed and say things to patients without clearly thinking about what they’re saying, he says. Research has show that when a nurse sits down rather than stand while in a patient’s room, patients actually perceive that the staff member has spent more time with them, even if the time period is the same, according to Doucette.

Celebrating staff

Lee Memorial employees make time for fun at work

In addition to providing compassionate care, Jeff Doucette, RN, MS, CEN, CHE, CNAA, executive director of patient care and customer services at Lee Memorial Health System in Fort Meyers, FL, also stresses that nurses must let themselves celebrate the profession and have fun while on the job. Employees at many health care facilities are much too serious, he says. “People need to know that it’s okay to have more fun at work.” Employees at his facility use the following to add fun to the workplace:

Permanent picture boards

One public board in a hallway in the emergency department features pictures of employees at work—teams that have done something special and shots of staff picnics. A second private board in the nurses’ station includes more personal pictures such as employees with their spouses on vacation, or with their children or pets.

Happy thoughts’ bucket

Doucette and his team asked staff to write down a few places, phrases, or situations that made them happy. Administrators typed up all comments and placed them in a plastic “happy thoughts” bucket. Comments included lying on the beach, drinking margaritas, going home from work, reading a good book, and even, joked Doucette, having a few shots of whiskey after work. Staff members draw a random happy thought from the bucket as needed.
Encouraging colleagues to pursue their passion

East Alabama employees excel in their professional achievements

Terry Andrus, chief executive officer of the Opelika, AL–based, East Alabama Medical Center, touts his organizations’ success stories. Andrus presented during the Institute for Healthcare Improvement’s 1st Annual International Summit on Achieving Workforce Excellence, held in Boston in October. “We’ve tried to focus on our employees as customers of the organization,” says Andrus. In that way, both administrators and fellow employees alike have become more sensitive to the needs and desires of their coworkers.

Helping employees to advance

At East Alabama, staff members take a keen interest in their colleagues, says Andrus, helping them to realize their full potential. One such employee who has achieved significant professional success is William Potts. Potts began working at East Alabama in environmental services during high school, then moved into materials management. After Potts expressed an interest in computers, hospital administrators and colleagues encouraged him to pursue his passion. He is now an engineer in the management information systems department. East Alabama has helped Potts earn his associate’s degree in business management, and he is now back in school pursuing his bachelor’s degree in computer information systems. Colleagues affectionately call him “Beta Boy.” To honor his accomplishments, the facility even designed and printed a t-shirt with his caricature and nickname.

Nancy Haynes, ADN, BSN, has also worked her way up at the hospital. Haynes started at the facility as a unit clerk, and subsequently worked as a lab clerk and phlebotomist. With encouragement from her colleagues, and funding from East Alabama, she earned both her ADN from local junior college, and her BSN from a local university. Haynes was an honors student, and following graduation, she moved into a new role at the facility—patient care coordinator in the cardiac observation unit.

Marty Ledbetter, ADN, BSN, MBA, also began as a clerk, but in the emergency room (ER). Andrus jokes that Ledbetter may have the record for holding the most varied jobs in the organization. After indicating an interest in becoming a paramedic, Ledbetter studied to become an emergency medical technician; East Alabama sponsored him financially. He then earned his ADN at a local junior college, and his BSN. Next, he tried his hand as a med/surg nurse and an intensive care unit nurse. After returning to school for his MBA, he worked as an operating room (OR) project manager and an OR case manager. Ledbetter is currently manager of the orthopedic unit at East Alabama—a far cry from his early days in the ER.

Andrus says that employees should help to encourage their colleagues to pursue their passion and advance professionally. By learning about your coworkers and taking an active interest in their lives and development, you may help them realize their full potential.

Recognizing employees

With significant achievement comes frequent celebration, says Andrus. In addition to celebrating individual professional advancements, administrators and employees also recognize those staff members who have excelled in service.

Great Rewards in Devotion (GRID) awards recognize especially devoted employees. At the end of the year, the hospital holds an Academy Award-type ceremony for these staff. Administrators highlight employees in categories such as courtesy and flash their pictures up on a screen. Attendees dress in formal wear for the event.

WOW awards fall under the GRID awards and recognize staff members who have gone beyond the call of duty. WOW winners have the privilege of parking in the doctors’ parking lot for one month. Recent recipients include two nurses who completed construction of one heart patient’s deck after the patient expressed anxiety that he would be unable to finish the project.
Caring coworkers enhance patient, staff satisfaction

After 29 years of nursing in four different states, Faith Roberts, RN, says the most important thing she has learned is this: Success comes easier if you relax, let down your guard, and truly open yourself up to both patients and colleagues. Roberts, the community nurse program coordinator at Carle Foundation Hospital in Urbana, IL, recently spoke during the Nursing Management Congress in Dallas, where she entertained attendees with her lively storytelling and imparted lessons learned.

Caring in the cafeteria
One afternoon in her facility’s cafeteria, Roberts overheard a food service worker at the register talking with a patient about the specifics of his wife’s condition. The worker offered her opinion and told the man that what his wife needed was more morphine. He should go up to the unit, she said, and tell the nurses to give her more of the drug. When Roberts heard this medical advice provided by a food service worker, she was shocked and made a trip to her supervisor’s office.

Her supervisor told her to show him that the cafeteria worker had been on the unit looking at medical charts—only then he would take any kind of action. After this meeting, Roberts realized she was overreacting, and came to see the benefits of the interaction between the worker and patient—the cafeteria employee was helping to enhance patient satisfaction. The patient had confided in the food service worker, telling her about his wife’s sickness, and the employee had simply listened and reassured him. He wanted to be heard and acknowledged—and she fulfilled those needs.

On another occasion, an older man whose wife had had a stroke found that when he reached the cashier in the cafeteria, he did not have his wallet. Roberts says that many people who play strictly by the rules would have told the man to return the food. The cashier, however, put her hand on top of the man’s and said, “How would you have remembered your wallet? You had to jump out of bed when your wife needed to be rushed to the hospital, get dressed, get her things, worry about her, follow the ambulance in your car. The last thing you’re thinking about is ‘where is my wallet?’”

She told the man that he needed to eat, and to be strong for his wife. “Take the food,” she said. “It was $4.29. Just come back when you can with the money, no rush.” That is this type of genuinely caring and understanding interaction that health care workers should aspire to, says Roberts.

Celebrating your coworkers
Employees should also apply this type of behavior to interactions with their coworkers, says Roberts. When one staff nurse at her facility decided to leave the hospital, Roberts said fellow nurses organized a potluck party for the departing staff member, complete with a wide array of Cool Whip products, she joked. Staff also purchased a farewell card, said Roberts, which each employee signed with a special message.

When the departing staff member opened the card, she started to cry, said Roberts. She looked at her colleagues and said, ‘I didn’t know you guys felt that way about me.’ Roberts says that the interaction made her think about the relationships between staff members. “Why wait until someone is leaving to let them know what they mean to you?” she asks.

Traditionally, many hospitals hold parties for departing employees. Roberts, however, recommends that nurses hold a party for colleagues when they start at the facility, rather than when they depart, to celebrate the individual and the accomplishments that they will soon bring to the unit.

—Strategies for Today’s Nurse—

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