Beating the nurse shortage

Recruit from your own staff to solve shortage problems

What do secretary Dawn Bleecher, physical therapist Scott Serba, and surgical technician Jill Lancaster have in common? They’re all studying for registered nurse (RN) degrees, and the hospitals that employ them are picking up the tab.

Through agreements with Harrisburg (PA) Area Community College, would-be nurses at Lancaster (PA) General Hospital, Community Hospital of Lancaster, and Lancaster Regional Medical Center, are getting the education they want and helping solve their facilities’ staffing problems in the process.

Lancaster Regional Hospital, a 286-bed facility with 1,100 employees, forged its alliance with Harrisburg Community College in February. Before the month was out, 24 people on staff had shown interest in the educational program, reports Denyse Kling, director of marketing and communications at the hospital.

Lancaster General has also forged alliances with Millersville University and Immaculata College, where employees who want to pursue bachelor’s and master’s degrees in nursing can also be subsidized by the hospital.

Bleecher, who has worked for Lancaster Regional for 20 years in clerical and technical jobs, had wanted to go to nursing school for a long time but couldn’t afford to do so while raising two children—until now. With a full scholarship from Lancaster Regional, she has enrolled in a two-year associate’s degree program.

Serba expects to earn...
considerably higher pay as a nurse and feels he will have more room for advancement than in his current position as a physical therapy assistant at Lancaster Regional. Lancaster, who currently works as a surgical technician at Lancaster General, believes that becoming an RN will make her much more marketable.

The hospitals will serve as clinical training grounds for students enrolled in the program. Lancaster General reimburses tuition up to $205 per undergraduate credit, and $250 per graduate credit, up to 18 credits per year. Lancaster Regional and Community Hospital provide partial tuition reimbursements.

Along with these scholarships, Regional and Community offer a loan forgiveness program that pays off employees’ educational loans in exchange for agreements to work at the hospitals for set time periods. Those who become RNs must commit to working at least three years after graduation. Students who don’t complete the course are asked to pay back some or all of the tuition scholarship.

Lancaster General has no requirement that employees stay on after they graduate, but the program requires employees to work at the facility for at least a year before they’re eligible for the scholarship and reimbursement programs.

But Regional and Community’s commitment requirements aren’t stopping anyone who really wants to go back to school, Kling says. “We wanted to encourage and facilitate employees’ pursuing nursing as a career, and so far, it’s really working,” she says.

The cost of sending an employee to the nursing program is about $13,000, but “well worth it,” she adds. Pennsylvania’s nursing shortage is severe, and promoting from within not only helps solve that problem, but also boosts staff morale. It’s good business, Kling says.

---

Is your staff informed about EMTALA?

The following five tips from Shari Mantini of the Emergency Nurses Association (ENA) can help you address the issue of Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA) education at your hospital.

1. Check your state hospital association to see whether it is planning any educational offerings regarding EMTALA.


3. If you are directly involved in the emergency department, become a member in state and national Emergency Nurses Association initiatives. Physicians can use the American College of Emergency Physicians (www.acep.org) as a great resource.

4. Check the OIG Web site (www.hhs.gov/oig) periodically to see whether new bulletins or issues have come to light.

5. E-mail the ENA at enagov@aol.com with questions and concerns. A liaison there will e-mail the entire EMTALA workgroup and they will attempt to answer your questions or pass them on to someone who can.

Editor’s note: You can learn about the ENA and its resources at www.ena.org.

Despite all your good intentions, it’s possible that there is a practice going on within your department that doesn’t fit within your ethical framework or dovetail with your mission. Your trusted staff may tell you that they assumed you knew, and that you were just looking the other way. For example, it’s difficult to think that you may have given them the message that some dishonesty may be okay. But we don’t always tell the whole truth about everything, do we?

Use the following tips to combat unethical behavior:

- **When you encounter an ethical problem, calmly meet with your staff members and discuss your concerns.** Discuss why their decision to change policy would be detrimental to (for example) patient coverage, communications with physicians, productivity, and the plan to improve staff ratios during peak activity times. Describe your disappointment clearly, without pointing fingers and raging with righteous indignation. If you do, no one will tell you about a problem again for fear of incurring your wrath.

- **Be honest with your employees regarding your own feelings and values.** Be certain that you communicate to them, verbally and nonverbally, that ethical standards be followed.

- **Admit it when you have made a mistake.** “I’m sorry that I gave you the impression that rudeness to other departments was okay. I meant to tell you that I understand why you feel like being rude back to them, but it’s not okay to sink to that communication style.” Be public about it. This allows your team members to know they aren’t expected to be perfect either.

- **Keep lines of communication open so that there are no secrets.** Most of us become uncomfortable with secrets that are devious in nature. Walking around will help you be more aware of potential problems.

- **Accept that as a manager/leader, you are accountable for the behavior of your team.** You aren’t able to avoid all the problems, but when they occur, you must do something to correct them and to avoid them in the future. You must also recognize that when your staff do something illegal, immoral, or unethical, there may be ways that you have contributed to the impression that their behavior may be “okay, if you don’t get caught.” Think about whether you could have avoided this behavior if you had picked up on clues more quickly, and then act on this in the future.

- **As a leader, continue to communicate the group vision and mission.** The mission will certainly communicate noble values, and these should be supported with clear ethical standards. Be certain everyone has a copy of (and has read) your profession’s ethical code (for example the International or American Nurse Association code of ethics). Don’t pass up an opportunity to point out the ethical standards you and your team advocate.

Retention

How to reduce absenteeism at work

By Gregory P. Smith

Today, there are more jobs than people. For those of you who have people with good attitudes and good work ethics—count your blessings and ensure you take good care of them so they don’t leave you for another facility. Here are a few ideas to think about.

Lottery system. One company uses a lottery system to reduce absenteeism. Only employees with no absenteeism during the month can participate. The lottery includes prizes such as a television or a bicycle. They were able to reduce absenteeism by 75% and reduce costs by 62%.

Play poker. Another company improved attendance with a game of poker. Employees who came to work each day were allowed to draw one playing card. Those who attended all week owned five cards on Friday. The player with the best hand wins $20.

Try a perfect-attendance program. One large rental business has several excellent incentives for its 200-plus employees. Any employee who has perfect attendance during the year receives $300, a limo ride to a restaurant for a free dinner with his or her spouse, and a gift certificate worth $100.

These ideas won’t work in every situation and could backfire if you are not careful. Keep in mind that good employees don’t need the carrot and stick approach and might find these ways offensive, unfair, or unnecessary. The key is to know the individual needs of your work force.

Be aware that workers who have child care responsibilities find it difficult, if not impossible, to have a perfect attendance record. One study completed in Canada shows that women with pre-schoolers took an average of 11 days off in 1998, compared with an average of 6.3 days for men with pre-schoolers.

Flexibility may be the best strategy. A better attendance strategy may simply include flex time for people who have children or parental responsibilities.

Some businesses give their employees five personal days in addition to normal vacation times to be used any way the person sees fit.


Don’t miss this date!

The American Association of Nurse Assessment Coordinators
Fall 2001 National Conference
Leadership in Nursing: Setting the Standard for Elder Care

Westin Convention Center Hotel, Pittsburgh, Thursday, October 4–Friday, October 5, 2001.

For more information go to www.aanac.org or call: 303/758-7647.
How to make suggestions count

An important aspect of an employee's initiative is making suggestions. Every employer wants and needs employees who can spot problem areas and suggest improvements in a sincere, constructive manner. The following are some tips on how to maximize your effectiveness in making suggestions where you work:

• **Start in your own area.** You can best affect the area you know the most about. In your current job, look for ways to save money, improve service, or streamline a process. Experiment as necessary to test your ideas.

• **Have a plan for implementation.** Suggestions can sound like complaints if there is no plan for their implementation. Think through the costs and benefits of your idea and how to make—or initiate—the desired change. Document your suggestions and share them with others. Consider who else would need to be involved to implement the suggestion and seek the input, involvement, and approval of those individuals as soon as possible. Own your ideas: To see them to fruition, volunteer to do those aspects of the suggestion that you are able to implement. Learn how to sell your idea to others.

• **Develop a mindset for making suggestions.** Think about potential improvements during transition times, such as when you commute to work. Try to develop a minimum of two ideas a week that you can submit or share with others for making improvements. Carry a notepad and pen or pencil with you to jot down ideas.

• **Support and build on other people’s suggestions.** By supporting other people’s ideas, you’ll develop good will and alliances that can be beneficial when you need help and support.


Risk management

Amend preprinted patient instructions

Many organizations utilize preprinted instruction sheets for test preparation, discharge teaching, etc. These can be helpful tools and provide consistency in the information we give our patients and their families. The potential risk occurs when you preprint on these forms a type of warning such as “leaving without medical care completed may cause death.”

With this preprinted on every form, you have no way of showing that it was emphasized for a particular patient or situation. Instead, you should write in certain types of warnings as addendums before you and the patient sign the form. Discuss this with your risk manager and insurance carriers for more feedback.

Get honest interview answers

When interviewing potential employees, ask questions to assess past behavior as a predictor of future performance. An ineffective question would be: “What would you do if a patient becomes angry during a catheter procedure?” The candidate will give a textbook or rehearsed answer. Consider these tips and questions:

- “Describe a time in your previous position when a patient became angry. What did you say or do? How did the patient respond?” Open-ended questions get the candidate talking and provide information the interviewer needs for follow-up questions. Closed questions prompt no information-sharing. Open-ended questions begin with why, what, how, tell me about, describe, and explain.
- Avoid telegraphing responses where you give the answer in the question. For example, “Our center is very fast-paced. How do you work in this type of environment?” A more effective way of asking the question would be: “Describe a typical day in your previous position. How did you feel about the work environment? What did you like best and least about it?”
- Ask testing questions. This is like a verbal exam to assess the applicant’s knowledge and judgment. “What clinical techniques have you used in your previous position? How did you use them?”
- Ask preference questions. If you are trying to find a good supervisor-employee match, an appropriate question is: “What did you like most and least about the management style of your previous supervisor?”


Managing conflict

Keep your cool when nurses get upset

Anger is the number one reason people get fired. Anger usually boils up when people feel that others don’t hear or respect them. Here are some tools to use the next time someone is upset and taking it out on you.

- Nobody wants to be told he or she is wrong. Whenever you have reason to believe someone is lying or not making sense, you will not build rapport by pointing it out. Allow them to save face and keep asking questions. Say, for example, “How does that relate to the . . .” (then state the apparently conflicting information). You might find you were wrong, and thus you “save face.” Or, by continued nonthreatening questions, you can “softly corner” the other person into self-correcting, which protects your future relationship.
- If someone is verbally dumping on you, do not interrupt, counter, or counterattack in midstream, or you will only prolong and intensify his or her comments. When the attacker has finished speaking, ask: “Is there anything else you want to add?” Then ask, “What would make this situation better?” or “How can we improve this situation in a way you believe we can both accept?”
- Ask the person to propose a solution to the issue he or she has raised. If the complaint or attack continues, acknowledge that you heard it each time and, like a broken record, repeat yourself in increasingly brief language variations: “What will make it better?”
- Do not attempt to solve problems others raise, even if they ask for your advice. People will spend more time proving their way works best rather than using a method suggested by someone else, even someone we like. It’s only human.

Know when to discipline a grumpy nurse

**Problem:** None of the gripes of one particular nurse surprise you because you’ve heard them all during her 10 years of employment. She doesn’t like the pay, the hours, the work, or most of the people she works with. But she never misses a day and is an extremely capable nurse. However, her latest complaints are undermining the efforts of a new nurse manager.

**Solution:** It’s tempting to ignore the constant complainer as a crank who is never taken seriously. Sooner or later though, the complaints will lead to a confrontation that can seriously undermine a nurse manager’s authority. Clearly, this subordinate is challenging not only management’s patience, but its authority. She must be disciplined. Here are some suggestions for disciplining a chronic complainer:

- You must be able to show that the employee’s behavior violates company policy. No one would question a manager’s right to discipline an employee who refuses to follow orders. However, coming down hard on an employee who doesn’t like the new color scheme in the cafeteria would be out of line.

- Don’t dismiss a complaint as being too trivial. Investigate it fully and get back to the employee with an answer. Some constant complainers are cured when they see how ridiculous their complaints look under formal scrutiny.

- Never try to justify a major disciplinary action by building a case based on a lot of minor complaints. Putting them under special scrutiny or constructing a file filled with reprimands or unsatisfactory appraisals will make matters worse. Each complaint should be judged on its own, immediately after it is filed.

- Never let constant complainers deter you from appropriate discipline. Some of them might argue that your discipline is in retaliation for one or more of their complaints. You have a right to discipline any employee whose behavior or performance has been unsatisfactory, whether or not he or she has filed a complaint.

- Sometimes the chronic complainer is only speaking for himself or herself. But there are times when he or she might be reflecting the feelings of a whole department. That’s why it’s never a good idea to totally ignore his or her complaints. Check with colleagues and coworkers to see whether there’s any validity to the claims.

- Be a sounding board. Most managers run and hide when they see a problem employee approaching. Try the opposite tack and attack their complaints with a quick investigation. You may find more than you bargained for. Often, people who act in a negative way are really looking for an outlet, someone who will listen and reassure them. Give them the attention they’re seeking, and you may lessen the severity of the problem.

Tell *Strategies* how you did it!

Last month Sheila Chesanow, RN, MS, NHA, shared some survival skills for nurse managers with us. Thank you very much! If you have an experience or tip that you would like to share with your fellow nurse managers, here’s your opportunity. Tell us how you solved a problem or handled an issue in your facility. How are you beating the staffing crunch?

E-mail Editorial Assistant Mona Hersey at mhersey@hcpro.com or call 781/639-1872, ext. 3215.

Understaffing is one of the biggest problems nurse managers face today. Paul Bednar, co-founder of Quality and Productivity Resources, LLC, a company based in Charlottesville, VA, that helps health care organizations improve their productivity and efficiency, offers the following steps to help you tackle this problem:

1. Determine your facility’s or department’s situation. You may be understaffed if you see employees working more overtime hours or an increase in the work backlog. If you are dealing with employees who are stressed or short-tempered, that’s another sign.
2. Evaluate your needs. Make sure you try to match staff capacity to demands throughout your scheduled hours. Evaluate each department you oversee to determine ideal staffing levels.
3. Compile the data. Pull together data from all the departments you work with. This includes gathering flow charts and listing responsibilities for each position. Make sure your lists include all tasks that staff perform in a typical shift.
4. Read into the data. Use the numbers to help determine how your nurses are getting the work done and how you can make the workplace more efficient.
5. Match capacity to your demand. When you look at the work level and the staffing level, you’re bound to notice some peaks and valleys. Your goal is to smooth those mountains down to molehills.
6. Never skimp. It’s good to be creative by cross-training the staff you have, using part-timers or outsourcing when possible, and offering flex hours that can accommodate both staff and your schedule.

Legal matters

Giving references for a fired employee

If you have to give a reference for an employee you fired, consider this advice to avoid being sued for unflattering remarks.

The key to protecting yourself is to stick to the facts and act in good faith. You could get in trouble if you exaggerate or cover up the truth—or if you are motivated by a desire to harm your former employee. And even if it turns out that the information provided is untrue, employers in most states are entitled to some protection in defamation cases. This protection is based on a legal doctrine called “qualified privilege.” To receive the benefits, you must show that you

- made the statement in good faith
- and the person to whom you disclosed the information shared a common interest
- limited your statement to this common interest.

The law recognizes that a former employer and a prospective employer share a common interest in the attributes of an employee. To get the protection of the qualified privilege, your main task is to stick to facts that you’ve reasonably investigated and to lay aside your personal feelings about the former employee.

A practical policy—and one that gives you a high degree of legal protection—is simply not to discuss an employee with prospective employers if you can’t say something positive. Just tell the person inquiring that it’s not your policy to comment on former workers.

Control your thoughts to relieve stress at work

The real secret to managing stress lies in controlling your thinking. Based on this knowledge, we propose the following principles to guide your thinking in order to effectively reduce your stress and improve your management skills:

1. I choose to believe that each person is doing his or her best.
   Note the word choose. This is an attitude that allows you to reduce your stress in the immediate situation. It is not an evaluation of the behavior of other people. If you are in a supervisory capacity, it buys you time to collect more information, to develop an intervention, and to formulate your feedback.

2. Expectation affects outcome, so I choose to expect a positive outcome.
   Positive expectations will open your eyes to possibilities and opportunities that are missed by people who expect negative results.

3. If I always do what I’ve always done, I’ll always get what I’ve always gotten.
   If your behavior has been producing positive results, keep it up. If the results have been less than what you desired, you need to change your behavior.

4. I can influence others, but only they can choose to change.
   As both a health care worker and a manager, you are in the business of changing behavior, yet you do not have the power to make anyone change. Focus on what you can control. Work on your strategies to become a more positive influence.

5. Life is not fair.
   Do you believe life should be fair? When something negative happens, you may say “that’s not fair” as if life were supposed to be fair. We have yet to find a person whose birth certificate guarantees that “life will be fair.”

6. Worry is more stressful than action.
   You may often create stress for yourself by worrying about something instead of working on it. To decrease stress, take action. Get around to it.

7. I always have a choice, and all choices have consequences.
   You are responsible for your own feelings and actions. For every choice you make there are consequences, so you need to look at your alternatives and choose the ones with the most positive consequences. You cannot control life circumstances, but you can control your reactions.


Desk duty

Keep your work life as simple as possible

To keep your time in the office efficient and pleasant, try following these tips:

- When information is not critical, instead of interrupting your assistant or colleague, send the information via phone mail or e-mail, even if he or she is next door.

- When meeting with busy people, ask for the first appointment of the day. Your chances of having to wait are reduced.

- Circle or highlight phone numbers the first time you look up each number in the phone directory. You are very likely to need it again.

Ergonomics

Get comfortable at work to stay healthy

Working for long periods of time without a break in an uncomfortable position can lead to headaches, eye strain, and loss of concentration. Moving within your range of comfort zones and various postures is good for your spine, muscles, joints, and circulatory system.

Get up and stretch to get the blood flowing into your limbs and to allow your left brain and right brain to integrate more readily by focusing on something else for a while. You will come back refreshed.

• Find your various comfort zones, which may include standing or a more upright posture when speaking on the phone to enhance the voice by opening up the diaphragm. It may include a more relaxed position when using the computer. Use what works best for you.

• Your chair should be of comfortable height with your feet firmly planted on the floor or on a footrest. Shorter people may have back strain if their feet cannot touch flatly on the floor since their backs must arch to get their feet to touch. Footrests can alleviate such a strain—this goes for airplane seats, buses, bleachers, etc. (A box of copy paper or a file box is just the right height for someone 5 ft 2 in!)

• The backs of your knees and the underside of your thighs should be free of pressure with enough space under your desk for your knees and thighs to clear should you cross your legs or decide to use a footrest.

• Relax your shoulders and hold your hands, wrists, and forearms aligned in a straight, neutral position. If you use armrests, your shoulders should be relaxed with your elbows in near your body when they are resting on the chair. Your forearms should make a 90-degree angle to your upper arms when poised at the keyboard to aid in blood flow to the fingers. Avoid resting your hands and wrists on sharp edges, which will impede circulation.


Strategies for Nurse Managers—September 2001

Strategies for Nurse Managers

Subscriber Services Coupon

❑ Payment enclosed. ❑ Please bill me.
❑ Please bill my organization using PO # ____________
Charge ❑ AmEx ❑ MasterCard ❑ VISA
Signature ____________________________________________________________________________
(Required for authorization)
Card # ____________ Expires ______________
Your credit card bill will reflect a charge to “Opus Communications,” the publisher of Strategies for Nurse Managers.

Name & Title __________________________________________________________________________
Organization __________________________________________________________________________
Address ________________________________________________________________________________
City ____________ State ____________ ZIP ____________
Phone ( ) ____________ Fax ( ) ____________
E-mail ________________________________________________________________________________
(Required for electronic subscriptions)

Mail to: Opus Communications,
P.O. Box 1168, Marblehead, MA 01945
Call: 800/650-6787 Fax: 800/639-8511
E-mail: customer_service@hcpro.com
Source code: N0001

Think back to the past six to 12 months. What major workplace milestones came and went without acknowledgment? Press the pause button and pull folks together. Take time to reflect, celebrate, and savor.

Look down the road. What milestones are quickly approaching? What will you do to reach them in style? How will the organization celebrate them and collectively learn from all that happened? Start thinking and planning.

At this very moment, think of all the people around you whose efforts have made a difference. It could be the folks who constantly do the “small things” that add up to “big things.” As the next two weeks unfold, make a point of acknowledging them for their great work.

Keep in mind the sharp distinction between acknowledgment and praise. The latter—with its gold-star, grade school roots—is extrinsic and patronizing. It can fuel internal competition. It’s a manifestation of our worst top-down inclinations.

Acknowledgment, on the other hand, is grounded in respect and gratitude. It knows that people do great work because of deep interests, passions, and commitment—stuff that comes from within. 

Building trust

To be a successful leader you must earn confidence

Leadership success involves enlightening others through coaching, facilitating, empowering, and enabling. This success cannot be built without trust. Great leaders are transparent, with no hidden agendas. They have a clear vision that is supported by their actions. As Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet and philosopher said, “What you are speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you say.” How do we communicate clearly? Try the following approaches:

1. Upbeat communications build excitement and commitment to our shared vision. An excited leader is easier to follow than a bored leader. However, when things go awry, use open, honest, and assertive communications with those directly involved to build trust.
2. This takes tremendous self-confidence. Since everyone else usually knows (and is talking) about our mistake we might as well fess up! A leader with guts tends to have more loyal followers.
3. Phonies are visible a mile away. When we share our personal struggles and “blemishes,” others can relate to us not as a businessperson, but more importantly as a human being. When we become human, that’s when they will listen more closely to us as a businessperson.

• Pull out a mirror. When something goes wrong, do we blame first and ask questions later? How can we minimize passing quick judgments and start making fewer mistakes?

1. Ask others what they think went wrong. Listen intently to their thoughts and feelings before expressing your opinion.
2. Go to a quiet place (e.g., sauna, beach, park, etc.) and reflect on what we could have done better. Then be the first to apologize for where we could improve.


We want to hear from you . . .

For news and story ideas:
Contact Editorial Assistant Mona Hersey
• Phone: 781/639-1872, Ext. 3215
• Mail: 200 Hoods Lane, Marblehead, MA 01945
• E-mail: mhersey@hcpro.com
• Fax: 781/639-2982
Publisher/Vice President: Suzanne Perney
Executive Editor: Claudia Hoffacker

Online resources:
• Web site: www.accreditinfo.com
• Access to past issues: www.hcpro.com/onlinepubs

Subscriber services and back issues:
New subscriptions, renewals, changes of address, back issues, billing questions, or permission to reproduce any part of Strategies for Nurse Managers, please call customer service at 800/650-6787.