Staff Engagement: It Starts With the Leader

Executive Summary

- Nursing cannot grow stronger unless we can recruit and sustain a cadre of engaged, spirited, and involved leaders.
- The body is designed to work most effectively in a series of 90-minute increments with a recovery time in between.
- The science of leadership/management can be seen as a game of chess where the pieces can move in all directions all over the board based on the uniqueness of each player.
- Creating an optimistic culture where people feel they have hope and freedom to grow and mature will create a sense of engagement.

Staff engagement is one of the watchwords of the day. With engagement, staff will become loyal, highly productive, and excited about their work. The opposite happens when staff are not engaged and not interested in their work and job. People who are disengaged are more likely to miss work, be careless, make mistakes, and cause accidents because they are not involved and attentive in their work. As a profession, we need leaders/managers and staff who are engaged and not disengaged. We know that management/leadership in health care is difficult and stressful, and that every year brings a new set of challenges. Yet there are those among us who thrive on these complexities and challenges. But there are also those who wilt and drop out entirely too soon. Our country suffers from the brain drain that occurs when talent-ed leaders are unable to sustain their career and drop out. Nursing cannot grow stronger unless we can recruit and sustain a cadre of engaged, spirited, and involved leaders who believe in the future and can plot a course to excellence.

It’s difficult for staff to be engaged unless the manager/leader is engaged. Staff tend to adopt the characteristics of their leaders. As you walk through units, you can tell the level of engagement by the ambience of friendliness. An atmosphere of happiness, attention to the work, and pride in the unit/organization is usually a reflection of the behavior of the manager. Leaders create the organizational energy by investing in their people, but leaders can also demoralize and immobilize staff.

In reality, the work of leadership/management can become drudgery which will lead to disengagement. It’s impossible to be all things to all people. When we are in a position that doesn’t utilize our strengths, we perceive the position to be boring, and even intimidating when constantly confronted with negativity. This also happens to staff. If we don’t create cultures of excitement and interest, the drudgery of work becomes overwhelming.

Engagement and Recovery

There are many situations that interfere with our ability to be engaged. In stressful situations, it is difficult to maintain connectedness and caring. Our ability to remain engaged is usually compromised when we are stressed. We often think that stress is our enemy. However, there are many people who thrive and grow on stress. In fact, if we don’t subject ourselves to uncomfortable and stressful situations we will stagnate easily. Loehr and Schwartz (2004) found that stress in highly competent athletes was healthful and stimulating. However, the recovery time between their efforts was the key to building championship performances. These authors went on to apply this principle to corporate life and determined that stress was not the enemy. Uninterrupted stress was the culprit and finding effective recovery times the key to success. They note that the body is designed to work most effectively in a series of 90-minute increments with a recovery time in between. If we see stress as a series of sprints with effective recovery times in between, these authors believe that we can organize our lives to have stress work for us.

If we don’t stretch and subject ourselves to new challenges, we will be bored and stale. But we also need the recovery times to continue the engagement. It is impossible to remain fully engaged continuously. We need recovery times which result in real physical and psychological recovery. We can organize the life on our units as intensive times of interactions and recovery. A unit that “stresses” together can also relax together and build in a sense of recovery easily and effectively.

The leader needs to guide high performance and recovery times to make sure people can sustain a level of engagement that is exciting and fulfilling. Short, built-in recovery times that involve story...
telling, laughing with a patient’s family, a quick walk up and down the stairs, and just an opportunity to take deep relaxing breaths and stretches will help the body relax and be ready for a new 90-minute round of intensive engagement.

**Engagement and Recognition**

Recognition is an important part of engagement. Buckingham and Clifton (2001) report that creating an organization based on strengths and recognizing people for their strengths is more effective that focusing on weaknesses. Engaged people are those who operate from their strengths and not their weaknesses. These authors cite the work of Plato, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and Nietzsche who tell us that deep in the psychological make up of everyone is the need to be recognized as an individual worthy of respect. The longing for significance and the excitement of recognition creates the recognition and bonding that leads to engagement. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses Healthy Work Environment includes “Meaningful Recognition” as the sixth standard a culture must demonstrate to be judged a healthy work environment (AACN, 2005). This doesn’t mean just a routine pat on the back or chocolates. Meaningful recognition means that the true essence and uniqueness of the individual is recognized and honored. The last thing staff want is to be considered one of many nameless and insignificant people who are not valued for their uniqueness and contributions.

**Engagement and Honoring Uniqueness**

The science of leadership/management can be seen as a game of chess where the pieces can move in all directions all over the board based on the uniqueness of each player. Buckingham (2005) tells us that great leaders/managers recognize and celebrate the uniqueness of each individual and build the process of the unit around the individual uniqueness and strengths of the players. High-performing units/facilities do just that. The leader is an expert at analyzing and customizing processes and programs around the staff’s unique strengths and interests and the needs of the patients. When people are recognized for their unique strengths and actualize these strengths at work, they will be engaged, inspired, and highly productive. When we try to fit round pegs in square holes, the outcome is frustration, pain, and a drive to get out of that situation as soon as possible.

Leaders who create engagement do so by carefully matching the person’s characteristics or strengths with the work that is needed for the unit. This means that when someone joins or leaves the unit, an assessment must be made about how the unit’s process can be molded to fit the new characteristics of the unit that are created by these events. For example, when a nurse who was very interested and competent in pain management leaves the unit and is replaced by a nurse whose interest is preventing skin breakdown, the dynamics of the unit changes and the leader/manager must rethink how the unit’s work can be done with the change in dynamics of talent on the unit. The successful man-

Engage the reader.

Energy comes from knowing that you are significant, that your work is important, and that you can work in an environment that fosters and supports your passions. The leader who is engaged and passionate about the work will communicate this to staff who will then feel the contagion and the excitement. Creating an optimistic culture where people feel they have hope and freedom to grow and mature will create that sense of engagement. High-performing organizations such as Southwest Airlines have created engagement with the use of their Culture Committee that has oversight for the health of their company. The Magnet® program provides an excellent evidence-based road map to create engaged staff who truly value their work, their co-workers, and the organization. The energy of a Magnet-designated facility is usually felt by everyone because they are committed to the front-line staff.

**Summary**

Engagement can happen if you can take care of yourself first and respect the need for recovery times. It’s very hard to find an engaged staff when the leader/manager is disengaged. Engagement is contagious. As leaders model engagement and connection, the staff will follow. Unfortunately, disengagement is also contagious and can create disastrous results.

**REFERENCES**


