Basic Practices to Help You Communicate Well With Your Team

Skillful communication empowers you to align staff behavior and move your culture forward. In order to improve performance, everyone in an organization must clearly understand the goals you’re trying to reach and the actions required to get there. Then and only then will your staff be able to act in a coordinated fashion. In other words, communication is the key to alignment, alignment is the key to good execution...and good execution is what will separate the winners and the losers in these challenging economic times.

Gone are the days when nurse leaders could rely solely on the monthly staff meeting as a means of communication. For one thing, information is often dated in a month’s time. Secondly, budget-conscious leaders try to avoid paying extra dollars for meeting costs. Finally, staff members work a variety of hours and shifts, which limits their ability to be in attendance. As a result, today nurse leaders supplement their monthly staff meetings using a variety of tools and techniques. Following are a few examples.

Communication Boards
Research tells us that open communication fosters employee satisfaction and retention. Communication boards placed in departments, units, and other staff-based locations throughout the organization can help us meet that need. The boards allow for consistent distribution of material based on the pillars (People, Growth, Finance, Service, Quality) or strategic framework. In other words, everyone throughout the organization sees the same messages that relate to key focus areas.

Often organizations provide standardized information for the boards—prepared by the Communication Team or the Marketing Department—designating what should be placed under each pillar or key focus area. If yours does not provide such materials, think of information that would be helpful to your team and create your own communication board structured under key focuses or pillars.

Department Newsletters
The department-specific newsletter is another effective communication tool. It’s usually a simple Word document created by the manager or director and produced on a monthly or quarterly basis. Newsletters cover a variety of topics and can reinforce messages sent in huddles or staff meetings. (They are especially appreciated by any employees who might have missed these events.)

A “Tough Questions” Center
Employees probably have certain questions they’re reluctant to ask. Leader need to know about these questions and be prepared with answers. That means giving
employees a non-confrontational way to ask them. Consider designating a bulletin board in the employee lounge where employees can post these types of inquiries or provide a notebook where they can be documented. Then, you can answer these questions. The beauty of this system is that all staff members receive a consistent, “official” answer.

**Daily Huddles**

There are two types of huddles. The first is modeled after the famous Ritz-Carlton “line-up.” The staff gathers at a prearranged time each day/shift (usually at the start of the workday/shift) at a specific location for a quick five- to ten-minute stand-up meeting.

The daily huddle fosters teamwork and offers nurse leaders an opportunity to reward and recognize appropriate people or share an inspiring story of high performance. These daily, shift-to-shift huddles also allow nurse leaders to reinforce specific, unit-based areas of focus. For example, you might identify patients who are fall risks or deliver a reminder to document pain medication reassessments based on your last quality monitor. Selecting four to five quick key messages helps the staff “get their heads in the game” prior to charging off to take care of patients.

The second type of huddle is less formal. Nurse leaders pull small groups of staff together for a specific purpose. Perhaps the huddle is designed to share just-learned information about a patient, or to immediately recognize a staff member for going above and beyond, or to communicate shift-specific details. These are used as a way to convey time-sensitive information, address poor behaviors, and reinforce good behaviors immediately.

**Rounding for Outcomes**

Rounding for outcomes is one of the most valuable tools in your communication toolkit. It offers you the opportunity to share verbal communication, but most importantly it provides a structured opportunity for receiving input and feedback from the staff. You might think of communication in terms of sharing information, but that’s only part of the story! The most successful leaders are those who have a reputation for listening. The rounding framework, if used effectively, promotes listening first and foremost.

**Storytelling**

The art of storytelling is as old as civilization itself. Since the beginning, people have invented and handed down the stories that make us who we are and define our cultures. And yes, like every society, every organization has a culture, too. That’s why stories are so valuable to leaders—they help us define, create, and understand our workplace culture.

Sharing stories about employees who modeled high performance, went above and beyond to deliver service, or made a huge impact on a patient or family member sets the tone for the work environment. These stories give life to the organization’s vision, its very reason for being. These accounts also communicate expected behaviors, thus serving to sustain the performance standards of an organization.
Staff Meetings
Monthly department or staff meetings continue to play an important role in communicating and educating staff. The goal of department staff meetings is to:

- Provide current updates and communication, especially that which is focused on alignment between department issues and organizational goals
- Communicate clear expectations to employees
- Offer a forum for small-scale education on timely topics—financial status, patient satisfaction results, rounding reports, and so forth

Employee Forums
Many organizations have “all staff” meetings on a quarterly basis, during which the CEO updates employees on the internal and external environment and provides other important information. They are often called forums or town hall meetings, and attendance is usually mandatory. Forums are usually scheduled at different times during the morning, afternoon, and evening shifts. A best practice at the unit or department level is to post the forum timetable in advance on the communication board and schedule employees to attend. It is often the leader’s responsibility to have extra staff on hand during these times so that there is no gap in patient care.

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