Lateral Violence: Creating an Organizational Culture

Change to Improve Retention

In January 2009, Nursing Administration at Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System (SRHS) joined forces with Nursing Education and Human Resources to take an in-depth look at the causes of nursing turnover within our organization and to develop strategies to improve our overall nursing retention rates. After an intense analysis of the nursing turnover data and an extensive review of the nursing literature, several opportunities to improve nursing retention within our organization were identified by this taskforce.

One of the most surprising (and challenging) issues discovered by the taskforce was the fact that some nurses were choosing to leave our organization due to unbearable conflict with their colleagues and/or supervisor. This discovery seemed paradoxical! The central focus of the nursing profession is caring; yet interpersonal conflict among nurses was significantly impacting SRHS’s nursing turnover rates. The old adage seemed true--nurses do eat their young!

After continued literature review, our retention taskforce soon discovered that the issue of interpersonal conflict among nurses in the workplace, or lateral violence (LV), was not unique to SRHS. The effect of LV on the nursing profession has been reported in the nursing literature for more than 20 years. Impaired personal relationships among nurses in the workplace can cause errors, accidents, and poor work performance. LV also depletes nurses of energy and undermines an organization’s attempts to create a satisfied nursing workforce.
Through divine intervention, our taskforce soon learned that Upstate AHEC had recently been awarded a grant from the Nursing, Education, Practice and Retention Program (NEPR) of the United States Department of Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA) to address the issue of LV among nurses in South Carolina. Our taskforce immediately contacted Upstate AHEC and began a collaborative education initiative on LV within our organization by April 2009. Initial LV educational sessions were targeted toward our nursing leaders--nursing directors, nurse managers, clinical unit educators and charge nurses. Response to the first LV educational sessions was phenomenal! Our nursing leaders were relieved to learn that they were not alone in their struggles to deal with destructive behaviors among their staff. Through the LV classes that were provided by Upstate AHEC, our nursing leaders not only learned how to recognize LV behaviors in the workplace, they also were taught effective ways in which to deal with these aggressive behaviors.

By August 2009, Upstate AHEC, as outlined in their HRSA grant, had provided several train-the-trainer sessions for key SRHS employees, which positioned us to assume internal responsibility for continuing LV education within our organization. Although the original target audience for the LV education at SRHS was intended to be nursing personnel, the news of the success of the classes quickly spread throughout other departments within the organization. As a result of popular demand, LV educational classes were developed for allied personnel. We soon found ourselves teaching 6-9 LV classes per month for a wide variety of employees, often with an overflowing audience.

One year later, we are continuing to offer several LV classes each month for all SRHS employees and class attendance remains high. As of our last count, we have
provided education for 1414 nurses and 737 allied personnel. LV class content has also been threaded through various other educational programs within the organization, such as hospital orientation and preceptor workshops. In addition, the presence of LV behaviors in the workplace is a key component of the SRHS employee survey, which is provided every six months for all employees.

By raising employees’ awareness of the issues and behaviors of LV, SRHS has seen a significant culture change within our organization. This culture change has not only decreased the negative effects of LV on retention, it has empowered nurses as well as allied personnel to bring about significant change in their working relationships and their overall work environment.

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