

RETENTION FOR NURSE MANAGERS

As a nurse manager, you've got one of the toughest jobs in the history of nursing: keeping your team happy and engaged in one of the toughest employment climates and a growing nursing shortage. Add to this the fact that retention is just one of a myriad of responsibilities you have and, well, it's a pretty gloomy picture.

Here's the good news; despite of or in addition to the prevailing environment where you work, you can have a major impact on the job satisfaction of your team, reduce the likelihood that they'll go job hunting (or accept an offer from a recruiter) using some of the basic principles and specific ideas we outline in this article.

Basic Principles

Always recruit your team members. Even if you had little to do with hiring employees, as a manager, part of your job is to recruit your team members. Constantly. This requires some effort and commitment on your part. You'll need to listen and learn what the individual needs and motivators among your team members are. Wherever possible, match the tasks to the person's interests. Make sure they are getting more of the work they like. When it comes to judging your team members, try to focus on the positives. They can tell when you believe in them and will be more likely to stay. Use positives to motivate rather than tools like guilt or fear.



Be as flexible as possible. This can be difficult in a hospital setting where hours are long and staffing can be short. Do your best to accommodate special requests when they are really important. Empower your team to help each other by shift swapping or allowing them to organize the schedule with your help.

Praise visibly and often. Praise is so important. Recognition is one of the single most important factors to job satisfaction. Be generous with your praise. There are so many different ways to recognize your team members from a simple Thank You, to a letter of commendation to a company executive, to an award nomination. Take advantage of all the avenues available to you. We provide some more specific ideas below and in our paper "Phrases that Retain."



Keep your team involved. This concept is partly about communication and partly about collective decision-making. Be sure that you are letting your team in on what is happening at all levels of the organization. Pass on communications from leadership, post news stories, consider creating a billboard where nurses can see important projects or initiatives in your unit, and include overall performance data on the hospital. Is it going for MAGNET status? Did the facility just post financials? Did the team just complete a quality initiative? These things and more should be visible to your team. Employees feel more engaged when they know what is happening within the organization as a whole.

If you don't already have a regular team meeting, set one up. Try to accommodate as much of your team's availability as possible. Ask for a volunteer to keep minutes that can be shared with those who couldn't attend (or rotate the responsibility starting with yourself). Use the meeting to discuss initiatives, ideas, issues and possible solutions. These meetings are also a great way to recognize individuals (See Praise Visibly and Often, above). Rotate responsibility for leading the meeting to make sure everyone participates. Be sure to circulate an agenda before the meeting and solicit agenda items.

Create community and team. When people feel like they are part of a workplace, that they "belong", they are less likely to leave when an opportunity presents itself. There are a number of strategies you can employ to create that sense of belonging. Giving new hires some kind of memento with company logo on their first day, recognizing anniversaries, getting your team involved in a charity walk outside of work, encouraging team members to thank and recognize each other are all ways to build team.



Listen and act on what you hear. Listening is key. Speakers can tell whether you are listening or focusing on what you want to say next. The key is body language and other subtle messages you send to the speaker. Listening is a skill that must be practiced and refined. When someone begins speaking to them give them your full attention. Put down whatever you were working on, lower your clipboard, and remove any temptation to do anything else other than give your full attention to the speaker. Look them in the eye. Lean forward and smile. Bite your tongue. Don't jump in. Don't interrupt. Make sure they are finished before you begin. When you do speak, begin by reflecting what you heard. It shows you've been listening and helps clarify your understanding. Try "if I understand correctly, what you are saying is..." Acknowledge any feelings you may have picked up on. "You sound frustrated." Or "I understand how that could

be intimidating." Always ask questions, even if you don't have any. Once again, it shows you've been listening and it shows commitment to helping them resolve or move their issue forward. Finally, if they've brought an issue to your attention, take appropriate action and be sure to follow up. Let the person know what action you took and any resulting outcome.

Simple Retention to Start Today

Smile. What else do we need to say here? Smiles are contagious. Start spreading them around.

Praise immediately. Praise is most effective when delivered as the good deed is done. Look for chances to praise those on your team, even for simple everyday things. "Thanks for helping me with..."



Let a “higher up” know. Has someone done something exceptional? Send an email to the CNO or other appropriate exec letting them know and copy in the person being praised.

Always greet people when you see them and use their name. People love to hear their own name being used. Greeting people makes them feel welcomed and makes you seem approachable. You’re more likely to get a chance to keep your team members if they are more comfortable speaking with you.

Lunch. Not something you can do everyday, but rotate through your team and invite them to lunch. This gives them some one-on-one time with you in a more casual setting, especially if you can grab a bite off-site.

Letter. Write a personal letter acknowledging a specific contribution. Leave it in their mailbox or at their workstation.

Award nominations. Does your organization have any internal awards programs? Nominate members of your team for a variety of rewards regularly.

Plan informal chats. The idea of planning an informal chat might seem oxymoronic, but it works. Walk around and take advantage of opportunities to speak one-on-one with team members as they go about their work. Find out what is really going on. Pitch in and help with the task, if you can, while you are talking.

Pass on goods news. Everyone loves good news. Be sure to pass on tales of good deeds among your team. It becomes its own form of recognition and helps build morale.



Retention Ideas

Random celebrations. People get bored when work becomes routine. You can help eliminate boredom by randomly celebrating and rewarding your team. Celebrations can be simple and inexpensive. Have bagels and coffee waiting one morning. Bring everyone root beer floats on a random afternoon. Decorate the nurses’ station with balloons and a thank you banner. Have a tea party one day where you brew up and serve the tea to your team along with tea sandwiches and scones. Take pictures of your team members doing something right and use it to build a Wall of Fame. Give everyone “Star” or “Team” pins. Bring in fresh fruit for the team. There are so many ways to keep your team engaged and guessing what you’ll do next. Get creative. No idea is too crazy. Be sure to check with HR or your own supervisor for anything that involves taking your team offline for any amount of time.

Good Stuff Box. This works like a suggestion box but instead of allowing people to anonymously submit ideas for change, they submit a note every time something positive is achieved. It could be that a group goal was hit or that an individual achieved something specific. At the end of the week, read each piece of paper to the group. It’s a real morale booster. You may need to set the example by submitting those things you notice yourself. Encourage the team to contribute their good news by drawing an employee note at random for a small prize. It could be 2 hours of free flextime or a small gift certificate for a local bookshop or restaurant.

Thank You Cards. This one is easy. Buy yourself a pack of Thank You cards. Use them as another form of praise. Make note of the specific action you are thanking that individual for. Leave it at their workstation or in their mailbox. Everyone appreciates a hand written note.

Training. Take advantage of all the training offered by your organization. Help your team members plan their own development by supporting their enrollment in available programs. If available, bring training to your team or seek out CEU opportunities or free online seminars that will help them gain industry knowledge.

Surveys. Use this as a tool to understand what is important to your team, what their needs and motivators are. Use sparingly and keep them brief. Most importantly, be sure to follow up on the results with some action.

Open House. Host your own Open House weekly or monthly. Make sure your team knows that during your Open House you are available to them to discuss anything. Set the date and hours, be sure you have nothing else scheduled. Leave your door open. Have small refreshments available to your visitors.

Walk Around. This is a very simple tool. Be visible and accessible to your team by joining them out on the floor. Walk around and find opportunities to engage your team members in informal discussions or to praise what they are doing. Smile and greet people.



The Crunch. We've all had to work under pressure, either because of workload, being short staffed or both. Working in these conditions can place your entire team at risk, especially if it is for an extended period. There are ways to effectively manage this situation. First, acknowledge that the situation is hard on everyone. Talk to your team about it. Pretending like there isn't a problem or ignoring the extra workload makes people resentful. Give as much information as you can about the reasons behind the crunch. Is there a temporary special project? Do you have vacancies? If so, let them know about the duration of the project or where you are in the interviewing process. Let them know there is an end in sight and acknowledge their extra hard work. Ask them what tools you can provide to help them get the job done. Do they have the equipment they need? Can you take advantage of temporary help? Make a sincere effort to help them through the crunch by pitching in where you can as well. Examine your team's workload and eliminate anything not mission critical during the crunch. That big filing project can wait. Don't forget to dish out the praise more than ever.

Mentor Program. If your facility has a formal mentoring program, hook your team members up with someone outside the group who can help them develop professionally. If there is no formal mentoring program, talk to HR about setting one up or tap your own network. Ask colleagues to mentor one of your team members in exchange for mentoring one of theirs.



Campaign Manager. Sponsor a team member for membership in a relevant professional organization, then become their campaign manager and help them run for office in that organization. It shows a huge vote of confidence in that team member and can result in great experience for them and good publicity for your organization.

Quick Thanks. Create small certificates or Thank You cards that your team members can use to thank each other. Set the example by handing them out yourself. Reward employees with a larger certificate and a small prize like a gift certificate or 2 hours of flextime for collecting a certain number of the Quick Thanks certificates.

Patient Thank Yous. Visit patients who have received care from your team members. Ask them if they or a family member would like to write a quick thank you note to a team member and provide them with the note card, pen and some privacy to write. Deliver the note card to the individual or post to the Wall of Fame when the note is to the group.

Wrap Up

Start by practicing the basics and building up your retention repertoire. With practice and focus you can master these techniques and build many of these ideas and programs into your unit. Before long you'll become known as the retention master!



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