

Promoting staff engagement

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

Develop leadership skills that keep your staff engaged

JAIME is a nurse manager in a busy emergency department. He's been in the role for 1 year and was beginning to gain confidence in his leadership abilities. Last week, he received the results of the Gallup Q12® Employee Engagement Survey, which his staff had recently been asked to complete online. He was surprised to learn that the results showed his employees to be less engaged in their work than staff on other units. Of particular concern was the employees' assessment that he didn't recognize their work, care about them as people, or encourage their development. Initially, he was discouraged by these findings, but his director helped him see this as a leadership opportunity with the potential for substantial growth for both himself and the staff.

Jaime's need to improve staff engagement isn't uncommon, especially given the focus in many organizations on the triple aim of cost reduction, quality improvement, and patient centrality. But with employee engagement directly linked to quality of care, patient satisfaction, and safety, adding a fourth aim is important: Improving the work experience of clinical staff to build practice environments that promote joy and meaning in work.

Research indicates that most organizations have an employee engagement problem. The Gallup organization reports that only about 33% of the U.S. workforce are engaged in their work, and the Nursing Advisory Board noted in a recent study that only 32.8% of nurses reported being engaged, with 7.4% actively disengaged. The good news for Jaime is that there's strong evidence that changing his leadership strategy and focusing on improvements in the work environment can make a difference.

Demystifying employee engagement

For leaders like Jaime, knowing where to start can be confusing, especially with no consensus about a definition for work engagement and how to best measure it. Conceptually, engagement is linked to empowerment, job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment. Staff engaged in their work exhibit



passion, commitment, and a willingness to invest in themselves to help their organizations succeed.

Effectively engaging employees is an important business differentiator, but workplace cultures can be difficult to change. Leadership approach, workload, level of organizational change, decision latitude, and career development opportunities all affect engagement and job stress. For example, organizations that embrace the Magnet® culture of excellence or the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses' healthy work environment standards have higher levels of staff engagement.

Leadership strategies

Gallup research indicates that managers account for 70% of the variance in employee engagement and that U.S. managers are only slightly more engaged in their work than their staff. Work engagement is higher among nurses who work for managers who practice authentic leadership and are themselves engaged in their work. As a relatively new leader, Jaime should reflect on his own level of engagement, build trust, and seek staff support. (See *Taking action*.)

However, you can't simply declare that you practice authentic leadership. Your authenticity can be validated only by those you lead, so you must ask for and receive feedback. Jaime could start by sharing the results of the Gallup survey, noting that he's disappointed and will be working hard to improve his leadership.

Many leaders think they need to have all the answers to be effective, but the interactions with leaders

Taking action

If your staff isn't engaged, take action by implementing these steps.

Promote staff identification with the mission, vision, and values of the organization. Help staff see how the mission and values of the organization are consistent with their personal values. Look for specific ways to provide connections between what happens in your department and the mission and vision of the organization.

Connect staff to the organization's success. Encourage staff to develop a sense of pride in their place of employment by showing how their contributions matter in the organization's ac-

complishments and status. Invite senior leaders to visit your department on a regular basis so they can meet with staff and talk about their challenges.

Create security. Provide staff with a sense of security about their employability and potential career paths within the organization. Show that you care about them as individuals, and focus on their strengths, not just their weaknesses. Treat all team members with the same respect, discouraging cliques and promoting workplace civility.

Build trust. Take the time to learn about staff members, inquiring about their dreams and goals. Listen to staff

and let them know their opinions matter. Communicate honestly, even during tough economic times, and demonstrate that you trust your staff and that you can personally be trusted.

Provide recognition and opportunities to build skills. Validate the staff's skills and worth and promote camaraderie and teamwork. Most nursing staff look for opportunities to develop their skills, and they want a leader-coach who will help promote their careers. Establish a culture of celebration by recognizing great work and taking the time to nominate staff for organizational recognition and awards.

is what makes or breaks employees' connection with the organization. Every time you're in front of an employee, whether one-on-one or in a group, take the opportunity to increase engagement through dialogue and inclusion in decision making. Start the conversation with an open-ended question, encouraging employees to express their opinions and ideas. Showing interest and respect for your employees' input lets them know you care, helping them grow professionally and own their learning experiences.

A two-way street

While Jaime has a responsibility to build a culture that promotes staff engagement, the responsibility isn't his alone. Work engagement is a two-way street. Vicki Hess, MS, RN, a nurse expert on employee engagement, contends that a key part of the puzzle frequently missed when evaluating work engagement is the *employee*, who may not know that he or she has a responsibility in the process.

To foster engagement, Jaime must promote the idea that it's a shared responsibility. Marshall Goldsmith, in his book *Triggers*, observed that survey questions asked in a passive voice, such as those in Gallup Q¹², promote the idea that employee engagement is an organizational

responsibility. The variance sometimes seen in employee engagement may be because some individuals naturally accept their responsibility in the process. Goldsmith promotes the idea that leaders like Jaime should encourage staff to question not only the organization, but also themselves. (See *Ask yourself*.)

An ongoing journey

Change is a constant in the healthcare environment, and employees' needs change as new generations with different attitudes, values, and beliefs join the workforce. Leaders must view employee engagement as an ongoing journey that demands intentional interventions. During the past decade, healthcare agencies have experienced unusually low turnover, but this is changing, and turnover rates are beginning to increase. Engaging and retaining staff will soon become a high priority. ★

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Ask yourself

Everyone has a stake in workplace engagement. No matter your position in the organization, ask yourself these questions to see if you're playing your role in the process.

- Did I do my best to set clear goals today?
- Did I do my best to finding meaning in my work today?
- Did I do my best to be happy today?
- Did I do my best to build positive relationships today?
- Did I do my best to be fully engaged today?