

Long-Term Care Survey Alert

COMMUNICATION: A Little Empathy And 'Active Listening' Can Help Complaint-Proof Your Facility

Here's how to handle an employee whose next call may be to the state.

If you're looking to build staff loyalty to management and the facility's mission, using what's known as "active listening" may be just the ticket, according to attorney **Loretta LeBar** in Lexington, KY.

Check out the following real-world example of how active listening works--and the key mistakes managers can make to derail the process, leaving a trail of disgruntled employees in their wake over time.

Scenario: A night-shift nurse stays after her shift ends for the purpose of talking with the DON or administrator as soon as one of them arrives for work. The nurse is concerned that the medication cart is in total disarray every night when she starts working, which makes her late in getting the meds out. She's tried to resolve the issue with the second shift to no avail.

The nurse has been waiting for two hours after a long shift to see the admin or DON, which means she really cares about the issue.

Avoid the first big mistake: The last thing you want to do as a manager is tell the person with an obviously pressing concern that you have an important meeting, says LeBar. "The nurse is tired, concerned--and says she wants to discuss a problem before she goes home.

"The administrator or the DON must let the nurse know her concern warrants her immediate attention," emphasizes LeBar.

Give a Good Listening, Not Reactive Responses

When using active listening, don't try to come up with an answer on the spot--instead simply focus on the person and her perspective. "You might say, 'Gee, I see you're upset. Tell me why you think the med cart is a mess.'"

Think of an analogy in your own work situation to share, if possible. "You might say I know what you are saying, I have a difficult time starting the day off right when my desk is piled with unfinished work," LeBar suggests.

Never drop the ball: You have to get back to the person with an answer, even if it's not the one the person may want to hear. "Lack of follow-up is a sure ticket for a complaint call to the state--especially when it pertains to resident care," cautions LeBar.

Encourage Problem Solving

When you listen actively and show the staff person you want to understand, you pave the way for her to respond positively to an answer that may not be the one she was hoping to hear.

For example, in responding to the nurse who expressed concern about the messy med cart, say you find out the staff on the second shift hasn't been organizing the med cart because many nurses have been out with the flu. And the temp agency nurses haven't been up to speed in getting everything done before the night shift starts. But the situation is beginning to resolve itself as regular staff recover and return to work.

You might say to the nurse, "I checked into your concern, and I have a problem and maybe you can help with it," LeBar says. "We have had several cases of flu on the second shift, although people are returning to work now. But how do you handle it when your shift is short, and you try to organize for the next shift?"

The goal: You want employees to become problem-solvers, while also developing a culture where people feel comfortable coming to managers with problems they can't solve, says LeBar.