

MDS Alert

Facility Staffing: Do Your Part for Supportive Workplace Culture

Leading by example can have a huge effect.

Nursing facilities are inherently stressful places to work. Caregiving is a meaningful but difficult enterprise in any situation, and caring for people whose minds or bodies are slowing down can be especially hard. When job stressors inherent to the long-term care industry - high staff turnover rate, the need to stay on top of ever-evolving red tape and regulations, rarely seeing one's "patients" get better - are bookended by workplace squabbles or apathy, things can feel especially bleak and stressful.

While this month's Nurse Appreciation Week and Nurse Assessment Coordinator (NAC) Appreciation Day present opportunities for staff to express gratitude and appreciation for one another, management and individual employees can have a big impact on team member happiness and general morale year-round by cultivating and maintaining a supportive and empowering culture for all team members.

Acknowledge Colleagues as People

Sometimes, it may feel like you spend more time with your colleagues than you do with your own family. However, reminding yourself that someone who is having a tough day at work may be having a tough time at home can be helpful in interactions where one person is reacting in a way that doesn't seem warranted by the situation. While you shouldn't feel like you're prying into the private lives of colleagues, knowing and remembering the general parameters of employees' families - and taking time to check-in and ask about them - can go a long way in reminding team members that they're valued as individuals.

Similarly, cutting team members some slack when they get sick or have to care for a sick child and need to call off can go a long way in establishing a culture where employees feel like management and colleagues care about them as individuals. Helping employees feel valued is a great way to boost their loyalty to one another and to the workplace as well.

Make Listening a Priority

Burnout is common in healthcare settings, and long-term care facilities are notorious for their high rate of staff turnover. Focusing on listening - both to your colleagues and to residents - can help others feel heard while also, maybe surprisingly, helping you feel like your efforts matter.

Stephen Trzeciak, MD, MPH, physician scientist, professor, and chair of medicine at **Cooper Medical School of Rowan University** and chief of medicine at **Cooper University Health Care** in Camden, New Jersey, and **Anthony Mazzei, MD, JD, MBE**, co-president of **Cooper University Health Care** and associate dean of clinical affairs for **Cooper Medical School of Rowan University** recently published a book discussing their findings on how compassionate medical care pays big dividends for everyone involved. The authors' work suggests that listening to patients and expressing compassion made the physicians themselves feel more emotionally invested in their work and reduced feelings of burnout.

Seeking and maintaining eye contact and utilizing active listening when conversing with colleagues and residents demonstrates your genuine respect and helps the other person feel listened to and witnessed. Freeing up the emotional and social bandwidth necessary to make another person feel heard in an interaction may feel like an effort at times, but doing so can make your workplace - and your residents' home - feel more supportive and less stressful for everyone.

Establish a Mentorship Program

Staff may feel more engaged and more loyal to your facility if they feel like their team members are invested in one another. "Mentors become beacons for employees looking to flourish in their careers. An engaged mentor who is leaning into the role for her own improvement will not only provide the example and the hard recommendations for the mentees, she'll likely become the sponsor needed to pave the next move in the employee's career," says **Sean Sullivan, MBA, PMP**, founder of **Kind Seas LLC**, a consulting company focusing on business and executive leadership, in Naples, New York.

Plus, the "soft skills" that correlate with good leadership and management aren't necessarily a part of staff training these days across corporate culture, he says. Though nursing facilities are focused on delivering care to residents and keeping residents' families in the loop, the structure and culture of the workplace can echo more blatantly corporate frameworks.

Staff members, including nurses and direct care staff, may find themselves in situations requiring leadership skills frequently throughout the day, and knowing how to navigate those circumstances can ease tension and boost employee confidence.

Seek - or Invest - in Education

When employees feel confident of their skills and how their skillset matches their job description or role, they're more likely to feel prepared to excel. For example, if you have been doing MDS work for a while but think certification, such as RAC-CT®, could help you find every dollar your facility is owed, consider approaching your superior and asking if your facility will support you furthering your education. Outline how further education will help you help residents, as well as boosting your facility's bottom line, survey outcomes, and quality initiatives.

If a team member is struggling learning the ropes, supporting her in reaching the next level of certification or education is another great way to empower her and help your work environment feel like it's a place where staff can thrive professionally.

When All Else Fails, Bring Treats

Anyone who has ever been to a good party or hosted a great party knows how important food can be in helping create a great environment for interpersonal interactions. If you're noticing that morale is low, food might help.

Make sure you're not breaking any facility policies before bringing in a batch of homemade cookies or a from-scratch lasagna, but imagine the shock and surprise on your team members' faces when you offer up that kind of treat.

If cooking or baking aren't your forte - or your facility has strict rules on outside food or team members' health or lifestyle doesn't allow edible treats - consider writing a brief note of appreciation to the team members with whom you work closely. Investing time, energy, or effort in making someone else feel like she and her work matter is an easy means of making your facility a better workplace for everyone.