Providing Professionally Meaningful Recognition to Enhance Frontline Engagement

Karen Zwickel, BA
Jenna Koppel, BA
Marie Katz, MPH
Katherine Virkstis, ND
Sarah Rothenberger, AB
Carol Boston-Fleischhauer, JD, MS, BSN, RN

To achieve transformation in care delivery, frontline nursing staff must be committed to their organization’s mission, engaged in their work, and capable of delivering high-quality care. However, data from Advisory Board Survey Solutions show that, when compared with other frontline staff, nurses are the least engaged and most disengaged. In this article, the authors describe strategies for addressing a top opportunity for improving nurse engagement—ensuring nurses feel meaningfully recognized for their professional impact.

To identify top opportunities for driving nurse engagement, researchers at the Nursing Executive Center (NEC), a division of The Advisory Board Company, analyzed responses from a 2014 engagement survey database of more than 343,000 employees at 575 healthcare organizations. Additional details on the authors’ research methodology are described in Perspectives on Engagement in the April 2015 issue of JONA.

Recognition: A Top Opportunity for Improving Nurse Engagement

A top opportunity for improving nurse engagement is to provide meaningful recognition for staff achievements and contributions. Survey data from The Advisory Board’s 2014 Employee Engagement Survey Database confirm this: only 50% of nurses agree or strongly agree with the statements “My organization recognizes employees for excellent work” and “Executives at my organization respect the contributions of my unit/department.”

To determine why nurses do not agree with these statements, NEC researchers conducted more than 100 telephone interviews with nurse leaders (including chief nursing officers, nursing directors, and nurse managers).

On the basis of the qualitative analysis of these interviews, a key reason emerged: recognition tactics often undervalue professional impact. For example, a group celebration to thank nurses for their work may not recognize specific achievements. To ensure staff feel valued by their organization, leaders must provide recognition that is professionally meaningful.

Characteristics of Professionally Meaningful Recognition

On the basis of analysis of qualitative interviews with nurse executives, directors, managers, and staff, meaningful recognition has 3 key characteristics. First, it is linked to specific accomplishments. Second, it is delivered by someone professionally important to the recipient, such as an executive, a manager, or a respected peer. Third, it is timely. Recognition...
delivered promptly after a specific achievement tends to be more meaningful than accolades provided several months later.

**Strategies for Building Meaningful Recognition Into Leader Workflow**

Busy leaders have limited time to identify specific accomplishments and deliver meaningful recognition in a timely manner. To address this challenge, NEC researchers identified the following strategies to help leaders build professionally meaningful recognition into their own workflow.

**Equip Managers With Tools for Delivering Personalized Recognition**

A personalized, handwritten note that acknowledges a staff member’s specific effort or achievement can be professionally meaningful. However, busy nurse managers often do not have the time to track down a note card, a stamp, or a staff member’s current mailing address. To streamline this process, leaders at a health system in the Midwest equip each unit manager with a “frontline recognition kit,” which contains note cards, stamps, staff members’ home addresses, and examples of substantive feedback. Every 2 months, nursing directors replenish the kit with supplies and updated staff addresses. Providing managers with materials in advance enables them to more readily provide timely, professionally meaningful recognition.

**Hardwire a Standardized Process for Executive-Delivered Recognition**

Public recognition of staff accomplishments by an executive leader can also be professionally meaningful. For example, the president of a healthcare system on the East Coast sends a weekly “Friday feedback” email to all staff, highlighting noteworthy staff accomplishments and describing how they help advance organizational priorities. To build this type of recognition into the executive’s busy schedule, the president’s administrative assistant compiles weekly nominations drawn from multiple sources, including patient feedback forms and peer or manager nominations.

**Use Clear Performance Criteria to Trigger Staff Recognition**

A 3rd strategy for building professionally meaningful recognition into leader workflow is to set clear performance targets that trigger recognition. This helps staff understand what specifically to work toward. For example, to maintain high patient experience scores, leaders at a high-performing hospital in the Midwest established 4 levels of unit performance, along with associated criteria and rewards. Leaders post this information in an area visible to staff (next to unit dashboards) so staff are up to date and motivated by their current performance.

**Conclusions**

To build an engaged workforce, frontline staff must feel that their efforts and achievements are valued by their organization. Leaders must create mechanisms for delivering recognition that is professionally meaningful in a timely manner. Nursing Executive Center researchers recommend 3 strategies for delivering professionally meaningful and timely recognition to staff: equip managers with tools for delivering personalized recognition, hardwire a standardized process for executive-delivered recognition, and use clear performance criteria to trigger staff recognition.

**REFERENCES**