

Build Pride and Enthusiasm in Employees

BY RHODA WEISS

Do you remember the first day of work at your healthcare organization? Like other new employees, you probably felt like an outsider and faced uncertainty, discomfort, and even fear.

If employees are our number one customer (and the key players for determining patient satisfaction and marketing our organizations), then we need to develop a comprehensive communications plan based upon those "moments of truth" that determine an employee's own enthusiasm or dissatisfaction with our organizations. Here are some tactics that are adaptable to organizations of all sizes.

IN THE BEGINNING

If at all possible, have the executive supervising that area make a welcoming call to the employee's home or send a letter to the newcomer's family saying how pleased the organization is to have their family member coming on board.

Before an employee's first day, assign the newcomer a volunteer "buddy" (another employee) who makes a welcoming telephone call, meets the new employee in the lobby on the first day of work, walks the person to orientation, shares meals, and answers questions.

Place a photo of all new employees near the cafeteria (identification photos are already taken for the name badge; just print one more picture). Include the employee's name, department, and even city of birth (this is very popular with some hotels and restaurants, which include the place of birth on the name tag). Also add a "new employee" identifier to the name badge. This allows other employees to share their own special welcome.

Make orientation interesting and fun. Have a long-time outstanding employee give a brief presentation on what the organization means to him or her. And try this ice breaker: Assign employee pairs during orientation and have the other person introduce the newcomer (and vice versa).



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ENHANCE EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Give each new employee a file folder titled, "What Makes Me Proud about Working at —." They can use these files for complimentary letters, accolades, and records of other personal accomplishments.

Reconsider your "Employee of the Month" program. Initiate a program that recognizes employees, physicians, and volunteers on a daily basis. Expand beyond the typical categories of achievement so that every employee has an opportunity to be recognized sometime during the year. Distribute forms throughout the organization so employees, volunteers, patients, physicians, visitors, vendors, board members, and others can recognize individuals for a job well done each and every day, not just on a monthly "chosen" basis.

In addition to posting *all* complimentary letters (with the writer's permission, of course), send a copy of the letter to the employee's home so that the family also learns about the accolade. Give those special employees a "branded" item that also increases the visibility of the organization—a t-shirt, mug, or cap. Present inexpensive items like movie tickets, meal certificates, and video rentals.

Give *every* employee a business "pride" card. That's right, every employee. Employees are the number one referral source for healthcare organizations. While the front side remains a business card, the flip side, entitled, "Pride Card," lists six or seven "superlative" points that differentiates your organization from the crowd.

KEEPING EMPLOYEES HEALTHY AND EDUCATED

All year long, we ask our employees to participate in community health fairs and screenings. Consider a family health fair that includes employees, physicians, volunteers and their families. Administration members and retired employees and physicians could staff the booths and screenings.

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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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Consider a wellness program, like the Wellness Challenge initiated by Providence Medical Center in Everett, WA, and now available throughout the United States. Provide incentives for employees who improve their health by reducing their blood pressure, weight, or cholesterol. It will pay back in terms of a happier and healthier workforce as well as in a reduction of benefit costs.

Many states require a minimum number of continuing education units for relicensure of nurses and other ancillary personnel. This can be expensive for your staff. Help them renew their licenses without any cost to the employee. Allow nonphysicians to attend continuing medical education programs (hospitals offer dozens annually) at no charge (physicians are typically not charged for the majority of the programs). Work with your education department to ensure credits are accepted. This is also a great nurse and professional staff recruitment tool.

Ask high school or college students to volunteer to teach computer and Internet classes to employees. Most healthcare organizations have a computer education room that can be used in off hours by your employees (plus physicians, volunteers, and board members) to improve their computer skills.

COMMUNICATION OPTIONS

"We're going to paperless communications for our employee newsletters." I heard this statement three times this year from corporate communications executives at health systems. I asked them to reconsider. A large number of their employees do not have a computer, cannot use a computer, or don't have time during the day to access a newsletter. The danger is that this strategy might establish a caste system whereby employees in housekeeping, laundry, dietary, and other areas may

not receive a newsletter. The same is true for nurses and ancillary personnel who may have computer access but do not have the time to read a newsletter on the job or download it. A better solution is to make newsletters available on paper and on the intranet as well as posted in bathrooms, in take-one stands, and in other locations. While nothing takes the place of the employee's supervisor or executive, employee newsletters will continue to supplement information. The more frequent the newsletter, the better. It need not be expensive, but can be a simple single- or double-sided copied piece. The key is to frequently mention employee achievements as well as organizational plans and services.

Consider a complaint and/or rumor line. This could have updated messages from the CEO as well as provide an opportunity to voice concerns, or clarify rumors. It could be initiated via a special telephone line as well as on the intranet.

The next time you conduct an employee survey, ask employees how to increase and maintain positive morale. Also ask what makes them most proud about working at your organization. Gather all the "proud" comments and use them for mission planning and as testimonials.

Marketers and communications professionals spend much time and money on making sure external customers are aware of our services, but we do not expend even half the effort doing the same for our employees. Make sure employees and their families are the first to know about new and existing programs and services, plans and activities. Remember that when the community has a question about healthcare, the first person asked for an answer, referral, or more information is your employee. □

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