Managing people

A positive direction for employee behavior

In a busy OR, one employee who’s consistently late or always wants to take off early can wreak havoc on scheduling and performance. Seemingly small conduct problems are frustrating for managers: Is it worth starting the recruitment and orientation process over again just to replace a person whose small infractions are driving everybody crazy?

Katie Chamblee, vice-president for human resources at St Vincent’s Health System, Birmingham, Ala, has developed a method for dealing with these problems that she calls “positive redirection.” The method flips the equation on employee behavior, replacing punishment for infractions with rewards for desired behavior and placing responsibility on employees to meet expectations.

Positive redirection reduced turnover in her original organization by 4% in its first 2 years. When that organization merged with St Vincent’s, adding one more hospital and 2,500 employees, and the method had to be established, turnover reduction has held up systemwide, Chamblee told OR Manager. Other employee behaviors have improved as well.

Changing priorities

“Positive redirection is a process I designed to replace progressive discipline—the traditional approach of tiered written warnings and progressively harsher punishments,” Chamblee said. “That approach made for a kind of parent-child relationship, and I did not believe it was working well. It made the good employees, who seldom did anything wrong, feel belittled. And the employees inclined to infractions just learned how to work the system.”

The previous HR policy had a system of ‘points,’ or demerits, on attendance. “So many points and you got your pay docked, for instance,” she notes. “Well, the people who were consistently late learned to keep an eye on their points and start getting fewer points as they got closer to the end of a pay period.

With positive redirection, we make it an adult-to-adult relationship between employer and employee,” she said. “Punitive measures are replaced with incentives (chart on page 24). More important, good behavior is recognized and acknowledged.”

How it works

Instead of a list of “you will nots,” St Vincent’s presents every employee with a statement of expectations, among them:

• We expect that you will come to work drug free.
• We expect that you will respect the privacy of every patient.
• We expect that you will come to work on time and be prepared to work the entire shift.

“Certain items are dealt with in the traditional method with immediate termination—stealing, violation of patient confidentiality, physical fighting, and so forth,” Chamblee said. “But usually those are not the problems managers are dealing with. Positive redirection provides a method for changing the smaller, most irritating problems, especially attendance issues.”

Positive redirection starts with coaching for managers.

“We try to teach managers to address undesirable behavior as soon as they notice
it, not to wait until an employee review and not to just hope it will go away,” she said.

“The first step is for the manager to privately and informally point out the undesirable behavior—getting to work late, for instance—to the employee and ask what the problem is. This works both with the employee who’s always been on time and suddenly starts being late and with the employee who’s chronically late from his or her first day,” she said.

“In the first instance, there may be something that has changed in the employee’s life, like a sick family member or car troubles that the manager can help find a solution for,” Chamblee said. “For the chronically late employee, the first informal talk is the first step toward positive redirection: ‘You’re not meeting expectations. That needs to change.’”

This approach gives a manager more flexibility to deal with employees as individuals, rather than just spending time documenting behavior.

“There’s a better chance to nip something in the bud,” she noted.

If the behavior doesn’t change, the employee gets a written memo about the problem, and subsequently, a more formal conference is held. At this point, none of the expressed concerns has been entered into the employee’s file, a change from the previous document-every-step approach. At every step, the manager stresses that it is the employee’s responsibility to change the behavior and to meet the expectations made clear during employee orientation.

The last resort is to send the employee home for a paid day off with instructions to return with a written plan for changing the unacceptable behavior. The employee can choose to resign with full benefits.

“All the decisions are on the employee. At each step, we make it the employee’s responsibility to meet expectations and decide how to meet expectations,” Chamblee said. Since this plan has been implemented, she said few employees have gotten as far as the last step. Of those who have, the majority have returned with a plan and not had another problem.

Training to appreciate

Coaching employees to meet expectations is the disciplinary portion of positive redirection, but it is not the most important part.

“The most integral part is focusing on good behavior and recognizing improvement,” Chamblee said. “Reinforcing good behavior is as important as—I’d really say it is more important—than changing undesirable behavior. Recognition is the most important piece, and it has been the harder part to teach managers to do.”

Chamblee began developing positive redirection after a review of employee surveys in several industries convinced her most people leave their jobs because they feel unappreciated.

“We’re all a product of what I call the ‘red-pencil syndrome,’” she said. “From the time we start school, the teacher takes a red pencil to our work. We kind of get stuck in that syndrome—we judge ourselves and each other by looking for wrong things rather than good things.”

“In the past,” Chamblee continued, “managers ignored good behavior and looked only for bad behavior. Positive redirection trains managers to look for and reward good behaviors. Sometimes it’s as small as handing somebody a candy bar in a meeting and

### Changing the equation for employee behavior

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional policy</th>
<th>Positive redirection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attendance point system:</strong> a complicated system of points or demerits attached to each infraction of attendance.</td>
<td><strong>Attendance expectation:</strong> a simple statement that the employee is expected to show up for work, be there on time, and work an entire shift.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Disciplinary tiers of action:</strong> written warnings, escalating to the point of termination.</td>
<td><strong>Positive redirection:</strong> a system of informal discussions about expectations not met, culminating if necessary in a 24-hour leave with pay for the employee to reassess his/her employment and come up with a plan for improvement or resign, combined with recognition of good work or improvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Code of conduct:</strong> a 6-page document detailing potential infractions an employee might incur.</td>
<td><strong>Expected behaviors:</strong> a 1-paragraph statement of behaviors expected of anyone working in the organization.</td>
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Source: Katie Chamblee, vice-president for human resources, St Vincent’s Health System, Birmingham, Ala.
saying, ‘This is recognition for your greatly improved attendance.’ Sometimes it’s more organized.”

For example, a new piece of equipment has come into an OR, and 10 employees are expected to learn to use it within 2 weeks. Instead of shaming the 3 who lag, the manager is encouraged to post a list of the 7 employees who mastered the new equipment by the deadline, recognizing and praising them.

“That becomes a ‘good list,’ and everyone wants to be on it,” she said. “Our OR manager at one facility created a ‘Walk on Water’ award to recognize times when an employee has gone above and beyond expectations.”

St Vincent’s also uses “Diamond Bucks” that can be spent at area shops and thank-you cards to recognize and reinforce good behavior.

“It sounds simplistic, but it works,” Chamblee said. One nurse even said, ‘Thank goodness somebody finally recognizes that I’m an adult!’”

Implementing change

The corporate culture has to be considered when an HR change is made, Chamblee said. She started at the top, with executive buy-in and a presentation to the hospital’s board. With their approval, she began working with direct supervisors.

Even if the administration hasn’t bought into this process, an OR manager can still use the recognition and coaching daily, “which will go a long way toward turning around behavior,” Chamblee said. —Kate McGraw

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