Managing people

When a staff member needs to improve

Sixth and final article in a series on performance management.

This article completes the series on performance management, published monthly since June 2008. The first article gave an overview of the performance management process. The next 4 articles covered the job description, initial competencies, orientation, goal setting, on-going competencies, coaching and mentoring, and the performance evaluation. This article discusses performance improvement and gives a summary of the entire process.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts including coaching and support, a staff member may not meet the requirements of the job. When this happens, as managers we need to assist these staff members to understand where they need to improve. We need to set realistic goals for them to improve their performance. Then we need either to reward them for improving or move them to a job more suited to their skills and talents, or we need to move them out of the organization. This can give them the opportunity to be successful elsewhere.

Setting the stage

Discussing the positive aspects of a performance appraisal can be easy. A good introduction to the performance appraisal meeting may be something like, “I’d like to discuss the points of your performance on which we agree first. Then we’ll talk about areas where we don’t agree. I’ll ask for your perspective on both of these areas so we can learn from each other throughout this process.” Referring to the performance log you’ve kept all year gives you details about positive and negative aspects of performance that need to be discussed. (See July 2008 OR Manager, p 20.)

To have a productive performance review, discuss the positive aspects in detail so the staff member and you both learn from the successes achieved. A question like, “What was it about this part of the job that made you successful?” encourages the staff member to share with the manager. The manager can then share thoughts on the reasons for success.

Addressing problem areas

This positive interaction sets the stage for discussion of areas where performance has not been positive. This discussion usually takes longer than the discussion about successes. Managers experienced in giving performance evaluations review the staff member’s viewpoints on each job function prior to the actual review. They consider points of disagreement that will be easy to resolve and points that will take additional time to come to agreement about the future course of action.

The result may be the need for a performance improvement plan for specific aspects of the job where the staff member is not meeting expectations. The need for a performance improvement plan may also be identified at other times during the performance year.

Performance improvement is defined by nurse author and consultant Jo Manion, RN, PhD, FAAN, as “a rigorous feedback and documentation process that generally spans 60 to 90 days, depending on the nature of the problem.” (See sidebar for Manion’s model of a positive discipline process.)

Documenting the process
Most organizations have a form for documenting and tracking the performance improvement process. (A sample is in the OR Manager Toolbox at www.ormanager.com.)

The form should include the following areas:

• Space for identifying the exact performance area where there is a gap between expectations and performance.

Example: “Policy states that patients will not be moved from the holding area into the OR (except in an emergency) until all preop requirements, including signed, dated, and timed consents, and updated H&P are on the chart. In the last 3 months, you have taken 6 patients to the OR without this requirement completed.”

• Documentation of what is expected in the future.

Example: “No patients who are under your care will be transported to the OR (except in an emergency) until all preop requirements, including consents and H&P, have been completed.”

• Notes on how manager will assist staff member with meeting expectations.

Example: “If you are placed in a situation where the surgeon or anesthesiologist is requesting that you move the patient into the OR inappropriately, you will page me or the medical director of the OR for assistance with enforcing the policy.”

• Timelines.

Example: “Results will be reviewed monthly for 6 months.”

• Outcome.

Example: “If any instances of taking a patient into the OR without policy being followed occur, we will proceed to level 3 of corrective action (final warning). An additional instance after that will result in termination.”

It’s important to align the reasons for improved behavior with the staff member’s values, skills, and reason for doing a good job.

The example above is extreme because it refers to a specific policy requirement that must be followed. Many other performance improvement aspects are less extreme but need to be improved to make the staff member more effective. An example is a plan to improve the performance of a staff member who does not help others during downtime but tends to go to the lounge. In this instance, the reason for improvement should be based on the staff member’s values and/or personal reasons for wanting to do a good job. This reason might be something like, “Fellow staff members will be less likely to help you in the future when you may need help,” or “Fellow staff members are seeing you as not being a team player.”

**Involve HR**

It’s also important to include a representative from Human Resources (HR) in this process. HR professionals work with these situations more frequently than an individual manager. They can guide the manager in appropriate actions to take as well as ensure that the process is consistent throughout the organization. Though it’s uncomfortable to give a staff member negative feedback and to create a performance improvement plan, it’s even more uncomfortable to sit before an arbitrator or lawyer and hear that no other manager in your organization used the corrective action steps the same way you did. HR professionals can also help in conducting difficult face-to-face meetings with staff members.

Managing problem performers is not at the top of the list of ways most managers achieve job satisfaction. It is, however, a necessary part of managing people.
7 Elements of performance management

Here is a summary of the elements of performance management covered in this series.

1. Job description
   A good performance management system begins with a well-written job description that includes essential job functions as well as behavioral aspects of the job. It’s essential to collaborate with Human Resources when writing job descriptions. The job description is the platform on which all other aspects of performance management are built.

2. Orientation, initial competencies
   Each new staff member can be set up for success through a well-planned self-directed orientation and initial competency program. Staff members need to be fully involved in completing orientation and competencies by using a self-directed approach and seeking out work situations that satisfy their learning needs. The educator and preceptor serve as coaches to assist staff members with finding the appropriate learning experiences.

3. Goal setting
   Goal setting is essential in any performance management system. Goals keep all of us on track not only for completing tasks in a timely manner but also for improving our functions in our roles. One of the most important suggestions in this series is to keep a performance log on each staff member. (See the example in the July 2008 OR Manager.) Spending a few minutes each day or each week logging staff member’s progress toward yearly goals and completion of individual competencies will make the actual evaluation go much smoother for you and the staff member.

4. Ongoing competencies
   Technology used in surgery is changing rapidly. Ongoing competencies are essential in ensuring your staff is prepared to handle each new piece of equipment and procedure they encounter. The manager and educator need to assess changes in technology, procedures, and patient populations to decide on competencies for the staff to complete each year. Excellent communication with the staff throughout the competency process will help them to understand the reasoning for the competencies and to complete them in a thoughtful and timely manner.

5. Coaching and mentoring
   Effective use of coaching and mentoring skills can help managers to mitigate some of the negative feelings staff members may have about their current work situation. Operating rooms are experiencing staffing difficulties, more acutely ill patients, heavier workloads, more call time, and pressure for more efficient processes.
   The pressure on staff members leads to lower morale and less enthusiasm. Coaching and mentoring staff in their daily work can help to keep them involved and excited about their chosen career.

6. Performance evaluation
   Though managers and staff may see performance evaluation, including self-evaluation and peer evaluation, as a chore, if done correctly, the process can be positive. Staff members should come out of their performance evaluation sessions with a good understanding of what is expected of them, how they can improve, how they have met the goals they have set, and what new goals they can strive for. If all of the steps of performance management are completed in a timely and thoughtful manner, the result will be positive for all.

7. Performance enhancement
   Even when we’ve used our best efforts, we may still have to provide more help and support for a few employees through a performance enhancement plan. Allowing poor performance brings down the morale of the entire staff. Turning around a poor performer can be 1 of the most rewarding aspects of management. It’s a huge step in the pursuit of our ultimate goal—providing safe, quality care to patients through appropriate management of the performance of those staff members who care for them.