Managing people

The 5 W’s: A blueprint for counseling

OR managers who document their use of the “Five W’s of Employee Counseling” will never lose a wrongful-termination suit, a veteran manager says. Heather Carelock, RN, MPA, CNOR, who has had 35 years of experience in managing ORs and surgical services, says she’s learned the importance of a documentable, consistent approach to dealing with employee problems.

The Five W’s Carelock recommends are not original with her, she stresses. “I heard them years ago, and have used them at 5 hospitals. They always work,” she says.

The Five W’s are simple, she adds. An employee who is being counseled needs to be told:

- What is wrong.
- Why it is wrong.
- What you expect the employee to do about it.
- By When, and
- What will happen if the employee doesn’t follow through.

Coaching, then counseling

Carelock says there is a difference between counseling and coaching. Counseling is the more formal, disciplinary process. “I think of coaching as more positive,” she says. Coaching is a less formal approach to employee improvement and, in the team-based management style favored for ORs, can be used by managers and staff alike.

“It can be as simple as stopping a team member in a hallway and saying, ‘You did a really good job of anticipating the surgeon’s needs in there. Next time, though, you might want to be more careful about pulling everything on the preference card.’ Always offer praise with your recommendation,” she advises.

“Coaching is basically helping somebody get better who’s already doing a good job,” Carelock says. “It’s not just managers who should be doing it. All team members are responsible for helping to build the team and for helping individual team members get better so the team is working together to improve patient care.”

Team participation in employee improvement has come about in the ORs in the past 20 years, Carelock says.

“For instance, in any OR, it is important that the first case start on time,” she says. “So your expectation may be that all team members for that first case are in the OR by 7 am to start the first case by 7:30. But you have one employee who always strolls in around 7:20. In the old days, one of the other nurses would talk to the manager. These days, the team members would say, ‘Hey, we need you here on time for all our sakes.’ Peers are much more effective in these situations.”

She recommends Team-Based Health Care Organizations: Blueprint for Success by Jo Manion, William Lorimer, and William J. Leander, MD (Aspen Publishers, Inc, 1996) as a reference for OR managers seeking to create or improve a team-based organization.

“It will help you establish a culture for team-based leadership,” Carelock says. “There are several chapters on expected behaviors—the intangibles that make or break a team. And it is helpful when your team begins to think about creating and signing a performance contract.”
More pressure is needed

Sometimes coaching and peer pressure are not sufficient. “Maybe the person who is tardy responds, ‘Sorry, girlfriend; that’s too bad.’ At that point, the manager or team leader has to step in,” Carelock says. And at that point, the employee’s attitude and behavior probably would trigger the formal disciplinary process. That’s when the Five W’s come in handy: they are the blueprint for that first, verbal (but documented) counseling session. Carelock has them printed on a small, laminated card and hands out copies when she conducts seminars on employee improvement issues.

“The Five W’s can be used for something as clear-cut as time and attendance problems or something less clear-cut, like performance issues,” Carelock says. She explained how the Five W’s could be used in the example of the tardy employee (sidebar).

Verbal warning must be documented

Then comes the most important part, Carelock adds—this first verbal warning must be documented.

“Most hospitals have a form the employee signs acknowledging that she or he has received the initial, verbal warning,” she says. “That’s the step managers often skip—but it is essential, because if the employee’s unsatisfactory behavior continues, and you haven’t documented your initial warning, then you have to call her back in and start again with a verbal warning. Every time an employee is being suspended or terminated, your human resources department is going to say, ‘Show me the paper she signed to acknowledge that she knew what she did was wrong.’”

Carelock notes that the usual sequence for hospital disciplinary action is:

• initial warning/documentation of verbal counseling
• written warning
• written warning with suspension
• termination
• other action.

She advises managers to have another person in the room with them for even the initial, verbal counseling session.

“For some employees, you don’t know how they will react, so I always have someone with me. For the first session, it’s usually the OR manager and a team leader,” she says. “If we move closer to termination (which she defines as any employee who has to be counseled twice), I recommend having the manager and an HR person present.”

Carelock stresses that the HR department should be in from the beginning of the counseling process.

“It’s important for communication to be stellar between the manager and HR,” she says. “You need to bring in HR people well before you’re even close to firing somebody. Because there is nothing worse for a manager than having to take someone back whom she’s fired. That has a negative effect on the whole team.”

— Kate McGraw

Kate McGraw is a freelance writer in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Editor’s note: Carelock has been using the Five W’s throughout her career. We would like to credit the source. If anyone knows the source, please contact us at ppatterson@ormanager.com.