Creating a culture of retention for perioperative nursing staff

The best way to have a surgical facility that serves patients and employees well is to create and nurture a culture of retention, a veteran nurse and management consultant says. Keeping good nurses is the goal, and it requires a careful strategy.

Interestingly, money is not the only—not even the first—criterion for nurses deciding whether to stay in a workplace, says Jo Manion, RN, PhD, CNAA, FAAN. Not that she’s suggesting a return to low pay. Just that pay isn’t enough to retain workers. What is needed is an employee who is engaged and committed.

“Money is a satisfier or a dissatisfier. It is not a motivator to stay or leave,” Manion says.

“If the pay is good, you still can have a disengaged workplace. Because people feel they have no choice but to stay where the pay is good, it breeds unhappiness. And of course, the minute they can make more, they’ll be off like a shot.”

Manion coaches health care organizations on how to retain skilled workers, especially nurses. She also has studied the issue. Manion and her associates looked at what successful nurse managers do to create a culture of retention in their workplaces. They interviewed 26 nurse managers from around the country from a variety of departments, including perioperative services. They also interviewed 3 focus groups that included the managers’ employees and 3 of the managers’ direct supervisors. Manion says they found “remarkable consistency” in the reported behaviors. The study was published in Nursing Management in 2004.

Managers were selected to participate based on a variety of criteria, including low turnover rates; high patient, employee, and provider satisfaction; good patient outcomes; and positive working relationships among staff members. Manion adds that many of the managers reported having a waiting list of individuals seeking positions in the department, an unusual situation with today’s nursing shortage.

Joy in the workplace

In an interview, Manion told OR Manager that her research led her to the conclusion that, assuming competence and decent pay, skilled workers stay because they find joy in their work.

“Some people seem to have the knack of motivating themselves,” Manion said, “but for most of us, there are 4 ‘pathways to joy’ in our workplace:

• people and relationships
• the work itself
• achievement and accomplishment
• recognition.

“Some people can be engaged only if they have meaningful professional relationships with their managers and colleagues,” Manion said. “Others are motivated by the work itself—they get a deep satisfaction out of helping patients or serving the doctors and colleagues with whom they work. Some workers need to be able to ‘check off’ accomplishments, something they’ve achieved. And although some workers need recognition more than others, we all need some recognition that we’re doing a good job.”

What matters to employees

What begins and defines a manager’s strategy for retaining an employee is listen-
Manion asked participants to describe a culture of retention.

“It’s creating an environment where people want to stay,” one answered.

“It means people enjoy their work and the people they work with so much that they want to stick around and get involved,” said another.

And—“It’s an environment that meets peoples’ needs.”

She has developed a list of “5 intrinsic motivators” and strategies managers can use to put those motivators into play.

**Intrinsic motivators**

Manion says 5 intrinsic motivators in some combination will spur just about any employee to seriously consider staying:

- Healthy relationships. Employees want to be acknowledged and appreciated. They want a manager and their co-workers to see them as people trying to give good work.
- A feeling of meaning in the work.
- A high level of competence—and being able to grow in competence.
- A high level of autonomy. An employee who spends years gaining skill and experience and then is micromanaged will not be happy.
- Meaningful progress—seeing problems solved.

It’s especially important to start looking for ways to make it easier for nurses over age 50 to stay.

“Hospitals have to look at the physical workplace: the ergonomics of equipment, storing supplies in areas that are easier to reach, putting reading glasses or readers on every cart, and placement of light switches,” she said. “We have to look at how long OR nurses are standing and maybe even make rehab and exercise programs more accessible.”

Whether the nursing staff is composed of boomers or Generation Xers or (most likely) a combination, there are 5 essential strategies managers can employ to create and nurture a culture of retention, Manion says.

**Essential strategies**

The way to create a culture of retention is to create a culture of engagement and commitment, Manion said.

In her research of successful managers, more than 20 factors surfaced from the participants’ words and stories. She sorted these into 5 major strategies:

1. **Put your staff first**

   Successful managers believe their job is to put their staff first. They do this by showing that they care about them; meeting their needs; treating them with respect and high regard; using appreciation and recognition liberally; and providing support.

   “Listen to your staff. Learn about their families. Understand their intrinsic motivations. If the manager understands what other people find motivating, they will know how to keep them engaged,” she says. If the employee says, ‘It’s the money,’ say, ‘Well, I can’t do a lot about that. What else is important?’

   “If a younger woman says, ‘What’s important to me is that I am continually learning,’ then her manager should be looking for professional education opportunities she can utilize.”

2. **Meet their needs.** Pay attention and you’ll know when an employee is going through stressful times. She or he may need help with scheduling or child care, for instance, Manion says.

3. **Listen and respond.** Twenty-three of the 26 managers Manion interviewed identified listening carefully to staff members as essential to how they relate to and care for
their employees. The secret, she adds, is to respond with some action or statement that lets the employee know he or she has been heard. It may be as simple as what one manager says: “Just because we haven’t done anything doesn’t mean we’re not listening to you.”

**Treat the staff with respect.** That means all the staff, Manion adds. Nurses should be able to challenge or comment on decisions (respectfully) without being dismissed. Other employees count, too. One manager said a recent hire revealed that she decided to stay at that hospital because when the manager was showing her around, she introduced her, by name, to the housekeeper as well.

**Appreciate and recognize.** There are many ways to recognize excellence and efforts, from handwritten thank-you notes to bulletin boards acknowledging employees’ accomplishments to gift cards for restaurants or massages. The point, Manion says, is to find a method and use it.

**Support.** Support means anything from advocating for staff education programs to assisting in dealing with irate colleagues and families to creating a nonpunitive environment to report problems.

2. **Forge authentic connections**

Get to know your staff, create a sense of community, hire the right people, and have fun together, Manion advises.

A manager who knows a staff member well enough can be trusted with the information that a loved one is ill or has died, she says. And that manager will rally the rest of the team around that employee.

Hiring the right people involves knowing what you want in an employee and recruiting for those qualities. In Manion’s study, successful managers looked for people who were enthusiastic, even perky. They wanted people who were passionate about the work, who had energy and a sense of humor. Because they wanted to create a team environment, they also looked for employees who would participate on committees and be a part of team efforts.

Several participating managers actually have staff committees to plan lighthearted activities, Manion says. Offering humor and fun—from making popcorn in the middle of a shift to giving a prize for guessing the number of syringe caps in a jar—helps lighten the occasionally harsh health care environment, she says.

3. **Coach for—and expect—competence**

Managers who create a culture of retention focus on growth and development, Manion says. This includes setting high standards and expectations, making expectations clear, and holding employees accountable for meeting standards in clinical performance and interpersonal relationships.

Managers also support professional development, speaking proudly about staff promotions and accomplishments. They support attendance at national conferences; encourage their staff to write articles and present posters; implement strong orientation programs; and promote reimbursement for tuition and association memberships.

Managers also model the behavior they expect and manage the performance of their staff, Manion said. More than 80% of her research subjects specifically noted the need for performance management. They rewarded positive behavior and addressed problem behaviors immediately.

“They consider their credibility with colleagues too important to jeopardize it by ignoring problem behaviors,” she says.

4. **Focus on results**

Successful managers solve problems. It is a key to their credibility with staff. They empower and involve their employees by using team or unit structures, delegating responsibilities for specific tasks, and most of all, by actively seeking input. Sometimes a problem can be solved before it becomes systemic; sometimes it is a systemic issue and will take longer to solve, but the staff can see that the manager is working on it, Manion says.

The successful managers worked to provide adequate resources and a pleasant physical atmosphere. They make sure equipment and supplies are available. Managers
talked about how important it was to ensure that staff members were not left wanting for what they needed to provide quality care.

5. Partner with your staff

Successful managers almost all described a leadership style based on partnership, Manion explains. The keys are visibility, accessibility, setting clear boundaries, and communicating openly.

Balancing those can be difficult, she acknowledges. One manager’s supervisor told her she wasn’t delegating enough. She explained that when she was visible and accessible, the staff requests her input constantly. She put a note in the department communication book requesting that anyone with a request see the charge nurse first, explaining to her staff that her current level of accessibility was keeping her from issues she needed to focus on. She was surprised to find that her staff was not distressed or alienated—they knew she was still available for important questions.

Find out what’s important

In the end, the retention strategies used by successful managers are not complicated, Manion says.

“There may be some generational difference in what motivates people to go or stay but not as much as many people think,” she says. “Find out what’s important to people and create an environment where that can happen. We can’t afford to ignore practices that will retain our valuable performers.”

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References


