Morale boosters can make your hospital a desirable place to work

Google is the best company in America to work for, according to Fortune Magazine. Thousands of smart, creative individuals want to work there, not only for perks like nap rooms and free food, but also because of Google’s reputation for supportive management, effective communication, and rewards for a job well done.

Not all of Google’s methods can transfer to the OR. But perioperative leaders seeking to create a culture that molds motivated, top-performing, happy employees can take a cue from Google and implement simple changes that won’t break their OR budgets.

OR leaders, some of whom work at facilities that were also on Fortune’s top 100 list, told OR Manager they have developed programs to keep their employees satisfied and eager to come to work—which, in turn, leads to better patient care. Here are some of their approaches:

• listening to employees
• identifying and acting on their concerns
• rewarding and recognizing staff
• leading by example
• empowering individuals by providing opportunities for professional growth
• setting and measuring specific goals.

First, listen up

The OR at Torrance Memorial Hospital in Torrance, California, had the lowest employee satisfaction rate in the hospital when Patricia Jill Andrews, MHA, BSN, RN, CNOR, became the new assistant director for perioperative services in April 2013. “When I got there, the staff were working so hard and doing so well in less than ideal circumstances, but they didn’t like coming to work,” she says. “My goal was to make the OR enjoyable because we spend so much time together.”

Less than a year later, the environment has changed from punitive and uncertain to positive and upbeat, says Mary Williams, BSN, RN, clinical nurse III in the OR at Torrance Memorial, a 400-bed facility with 19 ORs. “I’ve seen a vast improvement in morale. It’s an environment that makes you want to work. From my standpoint, it has turned around 360%.”

Williams, who has worked at the hospital for 40 years, says she previously felt unsupported and was always walking on eggshells. “Now I feel I have the support of the director and the assistant director.”

Andrews says her recent patient satisfaction scores may indicate her staff is indeed happier. Every 6 months, employees take a survey and rank the hospital on a scale of 0 to 4 in the following areas: pride, job satisfaction, standards of behavior, dignity, and being kept informed by management.

“We went up from a 2.71 average to a 3.18 average of the 5 areas,” Andrews says.

Listening to employees and finding out what concerns them about their work is the most important step when trying to improve employee morale, says Andrews. In one-on-one sessions, she asks each employee, “If I gave you a magic wand, what is the one thing you would change?”
A “Moving Forward” committee consisting of RNs and surgical technologists helps interpret the comments. “Initially they met without management present so they could speak openly, and then the feedback was shared with management. Management joined the committee after a month of weekly meetings,” Andrews explains.

The committee identified 2 recurring themes: a lack of teamwork and bad morale. “That’s what we set out to tackle,” she says.

Michael Garcia, JD, RN, vice president of operations at Houston Methodist Hospital in Houston, holds routine staff meetings. Houston Methodist has 71 ORs and is licensed for 1,119 beds. Garcia invites every member of the OR team, as well as staff from the preoperative area, the postanesthesia care unit, and the sterile processing department, to attend, along with perfusionists and anesthesia technologists.

After providing a quick update on the organization and the OR, he answers as honestly and thoroughly as he can several of the top 10 questions submitted by employees prior to the meeting. The top 10 questions are listed on a PowerPoint, and employees simply call out a question number.

To take the pulse of the staff at Morristown Medical Center in Morristown, New Jersey, Pam Mestel, MSN, RN, CNOR, manager of perioperative services, asks them to fill out engagement surveys every year. Morristown Medical has 27 inpatient ORs and 6 ORs in its ambulatory surgery center.

The surveys, which are administered electronically to each employee via email, ask employees how involved their managers are with staff, if they feel they are heard by management, if they have opportunities for professional development, and if communication between departments is sufficient.

Managers review the survey and develop action plans to respond to areas employees cited as needing improvement, Mestel says. The plans are reviewed year to year to see if any progress has been made in those areas.

Silly things count
In addition to asking Torrance Memorial’s OR employees why they weren’t happy, Andrews started doing some “silly but effective” things, such as posting photos of employees as babies on bulletin boards, along with photos of their Valentines and pets. She also recognizes employees every 3 days for something positive they have done by giving them a lottery scratch ticket.

One of her more successful ideas was buying small Teddy bears for the OR from the dollar store. Employees can take a bear with them on vacation and then photograph themselves with the bear so the photo can be posted at the hospital. These simple techniques, she says, help the staff to get to know one another and to have fun together.

The book *Eat THAT Cookie!: Make Workplace Positivity Pay Off...For Individuals, Teams, and Organizations* by LizJazwiec, RN, provided Andrews with inspiration for transforming her staff, she says.

Jazwiec, a speaker and consultant based in Oak Lawn, Illinois, says if OR leaders want to motivate their employees, they first have to acknowledge how tough a job healthcare really is and the negative things they and their staff members may be doing that make it even tougher.

Maintaining a victim mentality and negative outlook is something hospital leaders and employees too frequently embrace, according to Jazwiec. “Why are people in healthcare in general so negative?” she asks. “Because we allow it. What you permit, you promote. It is the leader’s responsibility to put together an initiative that will drive negativity out of the department.”
OR leaders can boost morale by promoting 1 or 2 things that have gone right during a shift, such as having all the supplies that were needed, having no absenteeism, or properly maintaining OR temperature, she says.

**Recognize and reward**

Morristown’s Mestel says she chose to work at the hospital in part because leaders lived up to their promise of acknowledging and rewarding employees as part of the culture. This includes management recognizing staff and staff members acknowledging their peers for a job well done. Morristown is part of the Atlantic Health System, which was selected as Fortune’s 25th best company to work for.

Houston Methodist Hospital was ranked 46 of the 100 best companies to work for by Fortune. Garcia believes the hospital deserves this ranking because of the focus on delivering and improving quality care. Achieving goals such as reducing central line and catheter-associated infections are recognized, and employees are rewarded.

Examples of monetary rewards range from lottery scratch cards to gift cards to cash bonuses of $5 to $125 or more.

Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, California, rewards employees with cash bonuses equal to a discriminate number of pay days based on whether the facility meets certain metrics, such as patient satisfaction and financial performance, says Bernadette Roberson, MSN, RN, CNOR, director of surgical services.

Don’t overlook employees who shy away from the spotlight, Andrews advises. She makes a point of recognizing nurse attendants, and she keeps track of staff she recognizes.

“I believe in the carrot, not the stick,” says Mestel. For example, when employees were frequently calling in sick, she started an honor roll for perfect attendance. If an employee doesn’t call in for a year, that person receives a monetary bonus.

“The staff love it,” she says.

When staff member Marilyn Albanese, RN, came to Mestel because employees were not working together to accommodate one another’s scheduling needs, she gave Albanese a chance to fix it herself. Albanese researched a group app that allows her to send a text to everyone when the schedule is posted so they can’t say they didn’t know their schedules well in advance. She also came up with a shared drive so staff members could see they were not the only person who had to work Fridays, Saturdays, or Sundays.

“Pam listened to the staff’s dissatisfaction and frustration about the schedule and then empowered us to take our schedule back and encouraged and supported the entire process, which, in turn, increased staff morale,” Albanese says.

Food is used to encourage employees to have fun together and to reward teams. “We do a lot of celebrations,” says Roberson. “I have a staff member who likes to plan parties. She plans a huge summer picnic that includes all the departments in surgical services.” The OR staff also favor potlucks and include them during OR recognition week.

**Lead by example**

Andrews tackled a lack of teamwork at Torrance Memorial by rolling up her sleeves and helping the staff herself. “I get in there and work,” she says. “Employees won’t stand outside the door if I am pitching in.”

She also goes on rounds every 2 hours, she excuses herself from a meeting if a staff member calls and says she is needed, and she answers most of her emails from 3:00 pm to 5:00 pm, when all is usually quiet.
“It’s easy to sit at your desk and answer emails or see every salesperson who walks in during the day, but what are your priorities?” she asks. “Mine is the staff.”

At Houston Methodist, leaders strive for an atmosphere of collegiality where all members are held to the same standard regardless of title or education. “There are no raised voices,” Garcia says. “We work as a team to focus on the patient.”

**Tackle the naysayers**

All organizations have employees who are skeptical of efforts to improve morale. They may manipulate other employees to join forces and undermine a change in culture.

The book *Eat THAT Cookie* was named for just those types of employees. When Jazwiec was consulting with an obstetrical department, she designated a “no negativity” day and brought in trays of smiley face cookies for every shift. One employee said the cookies were professionally insulting. Jazwiec suggested that her colleagues tell her to hush up and eat that cookie. “That story always gets a big applause because we have all worked with people for whom nothing is ever enough,” she says.

OR leaders say they manage naysayers by objectively pointing out unacceptable behavior and explaining that all employees are expected to uphold the organization’s or department’s goals. The issue can be revisited if the behavior doesn’t change.

Garcia says his staff members are encouraged to confront difficult coworkers themselves, professionally and directly, if they feel comfortable doing so. If not, Garcia will take the person aside and explain the feedback he is receiving from other employees. He reiterates that every employee is expected to live up to the organization’s I-CARE values (integrity, compassion, accountability, respect, and empathy).

“These individuals need timely, professional, and objective feedback,” he says. “It is not my intent to change anyone’s personality; I try to manage behavior.”

Scripps Memorial’s Roberson says she sets clear expectations for her employees. She expects accountability and follows up with her staff. Roberson tries to prevent difficult behavior by frequently meeting individually with her employees so they can voice their concerns and be proactive with resolutions.

**Don’t get discouraged**

It’s easy to become discouraged when you’re trying to improve morale, Andrews says. “I had a potluck and only 2 people brought anything,” she says. “Don’t get discouraged. Keep pushing. The more you prove you are committed and dedicated to your cause, the more people will join you.”

If her staff are happy and satisfied, Andrews believes, good patient care will follow. “But,” she says, “I have to start by having a good foundation, and my employees are my foundation.”

Patricia Jill Andrews will be a presenter at the OR Manager Conference, September 17-19, in Long Beach, California.

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**Reference**