Nurturing and flexibility are driving forces in attracting and keeping perioperative staff at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Ill.

A lack of experienced applicants prompted Lutheran’s managers to start their own perioperative program for new RN graduates. They also developed a shadowing program for student nurses and surgical technologists (STs).

“I saw this as the way of the future for us,” says clinical manager Tina Maliwanag, RN. “It is so seldom that we get applicants with experience that I decided to put all of my energy into new grads.”

First, she knew she would have to get buy-in from the experienced staff who would be working with the new grads. She began by stressing that “eating our young is no longer acceptable practice.” She told them that if they wanted the new grads to stay after orientation and be available to relieve them of call duty and overtime, they had to help nurture the new recruits.

Keeping in touch

Maliwanag set an example. She insists on making all daily assignments for the 150 staff members and orientees.

“Making the assignments is the way I keep in close touch with my staff and track everyone’s competencies,” she says.

Making assignments takes about an hour. She believes this activity is more important than some other activities managers get involved with.

“It is more important to start the staff off on the right foot each day than for me to attend a lot of outside meetings,” she says. She also attends morning and afternoon report. Also popular with the staff are mini-announcements she issues throughout the day about what is going on in the OR, such as a new piece of equipment arriving.

The charge nurse does the assignments when Maliwanag isn’t there, and team leaders split staff evaluations with her.

The OR management team consists of the director of perioperative services, clinical manager, 2 educators, a charge nurse, and 2 team leaders. Lutheran has 17 inpatient ORs and 7 outpatient ORs. A trauma center, Lutheran staffs its ORs 24/7.

New grad program

Maliwanag expanded a once-a-year program for new grads to run continuously. A new group of 5 starts as the previous group reaches the 4th month of the 7-month program.

At the same time, she has aggressively pursued a program to have student nurses and STs come to the OR for shadow days. Student nurses work with a circulating nurse, and STs double scrub for a day or more. This gives students from some 6 colleges and universities a taste of what Lutheran has to offer.

“If they have a good shadow experience, there is a good chance they will think of Lutheran first when they graduate,” she says. So far, Lutheran has hired 5 nurses because of the shadowing program.

The OR’s preceptor and mentor programs are still under development. Eventually, Maliwanag hopes to have a one-to-one preceptor and mentor for each new grad. Until then, she requires each new grad orientee to give her a goal each day. She holds a debriefing every Friday where orientees discuss how their week has gone. She also meets with each orientee personally once a month to talk about any problems they may be encountering.
Program encourages flexibility

“Flexibility is our number one satisfier for our old and new staff,” says Maliwanag. “We bend over backwards to accommodate our staff.” If after orientation, new staff members request to work later hours because they are not “morning people,” Lutheran strives to arrange that.

New-grad orientees scrub first and then circulate through all services including ambulatory surgery, except for hearts. Near the end of their orientation, they work a week of evenings and a week of nights so they will know those routines.

At the end of 4 months of orientation, new grads buddy with an experienced staff person to take call and work weekends. In the beginning, the new grads were concerned about taking weekend call, but the buddy program has helped them feel comfortable.

“New staff now are able to work weekends and take call without fear or problems,” says Maliwanag. The new grads are self-sufficient after a year.

Advice on new grads

Maliwanag’s advice for successful recruitment and retention of new grads:

• Be flexible in scheduling.
• Set a goal with each individual. As the clinical manager, sit down with each person and say, “We want you to be successful. What are the goals you want to reach?”
• Be generous with recognition. Pat them on the back and tell them they are doing a good job.
• Be visible. Make rounds. Go into the ORs and let the staff know you are there to help.
• Aggressively pursue new grads.

“Many OR managers are not open to new grads. We have proven it can be successful,” Maliwanag says.

—Judith M. Mathias, RN, MA