OR Manager of the Year

Leading with compassion and humor

“...She walks the talk and always carries a bag of chocolate.” This is how one staff member describes Barbara Johnson, RN, BSN, MHA, this year’s OR Manager of the Year. The letters portray a director who leads with compassion, humor, and a passion for service.

For 18 years, Johnson has been director of nursing for surgical services at 550-bed Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta. Her management scope includes 16 inpatient and 8 outpatient ORs, 3 minor procedure rooms, the preanesthesia clinic, postanesthesia care unit (PACU), central services, and endoscopy, employing a total of more than 300 FTEs.

Johnson will be honored at the opening session of the Managing Today’s OR Suite Conference Oct 3 to 5 in San Diego.

As OR Manager of the Year, Johnson receives an expense-paid trip to the conference. She also receives a scholarship from Kimberly-Clark Health Care to attend the Georgetown University Healthcare Leadership Institute in Washington, DC, in the summer of 2008.

In the trenches

“She’s in the trenches,” says Sharman Caye, RN, CNOR, the clinical educator, in her nominating cover letter. “We feel comfortable sitting and talking with her over a cup of coffee, sharing work concerns, personal concerns, or making suggestions for improvements. Interaction with her is always met by her genuine interest and compassion.”

Petra Williams, CST, says Johnson makes a point to meet with all new employees and has an open-door policy for all staff members. “Barbara mixes compassion with a strong work ethic and leads by example,” Williams writes.

Caye says Johnson doesn’t ask the staff to do things she won’t do herself. In one example, Johnson stayed late to help hunt for a lost specimen.

“She came back the next day with gift certificates for a massage and free meal tickets for the staff that stayed to help,” says Caye.

When there is a mistake, Johnson “begins the conversation with, ‘I’m sure this is an oversight,’ and ends by stating that she has complete confidence that the individual can correct it,” Caye notes.

Johnson advocates “two good-faith tries” for interpersonal issues, expecting individuals to make two attempts to resolve an issue themselves before taking it to a manager.

Thomas N. Lewis, MD, chairman of the Anesthesiology Care Evaluation Committee, who has worked with Johnson for 15 years, wrote: “Barbara treats each person she encounters with kindness, dignity, and respect. That includes everyone from the patient transporter to the chairman of surgery.”

The greater good

Says Nancy Flanagan, RN, CNOR, performance improvement coordinator, Johnson “has taught us through example how to consider the greater good in all we do.” For instance, Johnson bought more wheelchairs for the hospital out of the surgical services budget when she saw the need. She keeps a folding wheelchair in her office for anyone to borrow when they need it.
“When other managers say, ‘I just don’t have the money for that,’ Barbara has managed her budget and is able to provide something as simple as box lunches for the staff when the load is extra heavy,” Flanagan notes.

Karen Kennedy, RN, a nurse in the Admission Testing Area, says that when she left Piedmont and moved to Alabama 10 years ago, Johnson wrote her a letter saying how much she appreciated her efforts and would miss her.

“I kept the letter with me at work and pulled it out and read it every day for 5 years,” Kennedy writes. A few years later when she moved back to Georgia, she came back to Piedmont.

Several wrote of Johnson’s compassion when they had illnesses of family or friends. When an acquaintance of Flanagan’s developed severe postoperative complications and had a near-death experience, and the staff on the patient unit couldn’t soothe her, Flanagan says Johnson told her, “For that day, my job was to be with this patient and help her through her fears.”

**“Don’t major in minors”**

The staff refers to “Barbaraisms,” pithy sayings that express Johnson’s management philosophy. Two examples—“Don’t major in minors,” and “If you love people, they will love you back.”

Two of her most frequent sayings are: “Remember, we are infinitely flexible,” and “Everyone is gifted to make a difference.”

Michael Queen, RN, clinical coordinator of the surgery center’s preop area and PACU, adds that when faced with a problem, the managers frequently say, “WWBD—what would Barbara do?”

**It’s the people**

What keeps Johnson in a position that directors say has become larger and more difficult to manage?

“The people,” she says, commenting that the managers, staff, surgeons, and anesthesia providers at Piedmont are “the finest I have ever worked with—the teamwork is incredible.”

Strong managers are essential, she adds, because no director with responsibility for several departments can do it all. Though she spends time in scrubs, she says it’s also important to represent surgical services on committees outside the department, and that requires strong managers for day-to-day operations.

“It helps to have an optimistic outlook,” says Johnson. “I believe everyone comes to work wanting to do a good job.”

Why should younger people consider management despite the pressures?

As manager, she says, “you have the opportunity to become a person of influence and play a role in creating a culture of optimal patient care, an excellent environment for the staff, and the best of the best in medical services.”