Engaging your staff in hard times

An engaged workforce is more important than ever in the hard economic times facing OR managers and their facilities, says Jo Manion, RN, PhD, FAAN, NEA-BC, an author and management consultant.

“A positive manager asks, ‘How can we use this challenge?’” Manion told OR Manager in a June interview. Her new book, The Engaged Workforce: Proven Strategies to Build a Positive Health Care Workplace, was just published.

Learning and reinforcing professional competence do not stop because budgets are being cut, she says. “It means being willing to try something you haven’t tried.”

Positive psychology

With decreased vacancy rates and staff members just grateful to have a job, having an “engaged workforce” might seem easy, Manion says, and that is not necessarily the case. Staff may still face economic stresses as spouses’ incomes are slashed or lost, benefits are cut, and job stability is less certain.

“Just having a job doesn’t make the other problems go away,” Manion says. “And let’s face it, some people might be making other choices if they weren’t bound by economic needs. Nurses might have planned to retire or move into other part-time work but feel they have to stay on the job longer. That feeling of being trapped doesn’t make them more enthusiastic.”

An engaged workforce—staff with enthusiasm and commitment in their work lives, teams, and organization— is more important than ever, Manion says. One way to create that workforce is through the application of positive psychology, a field that she has written about extensively in the new book.

More out of life

Positive psychology developed in the late 1990s. Previously, psychology had focused on alleviating the misery of people suffering from mental illnesses, she says.

“Many behavioral scientists are coming to realize that traditional psychology concentrates on reducing misery but does little to encourage happiness. In other words, even when medications relieve symptoms of depression, the person may not be happy,” Manion adds.

Positive psychology recognizes that people want more out of life than correcting their weaknesses and deficiencies. People want to live lives of meaning and purpose, and they want to be happy, Manion asserts.

“Only focusing on what’s going wrong leaves a staff demoralized. You may need to focus briefly on what’s gone wrong to make corrections, but if you don’t move past that, you’re going to stay stuck there.”

As Martin E. Seligman noted in his book, Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment, “the
time has finally arrived for a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called ‘the good life.’”

Joy at work?

“Work and happiness? Joy at work? For some, these terms seem contradictory. Yet how a person feels at work and whether he or she is happy at work determine to a great extent what that person’s life is like,” Manion writes.

Most people spend the majority of their awake and alert hours at work, and if they are not happy there, they often judge their lives to be unhappy, she says.

Managers can have a lot to do with the emotional environment of a workplace, she adds. It has become conventional wisdom that the relationship between employees and their manager is crucial to employees’ commitment to stay with the organization, Manion says. Research in positive psychology supports this assertion. Research from positive psychology offers concrete, evidence-based suggestions for establishing a workplace in which happiness and joy are key characteristics.

Energy producing

The number-one thing for OR managers to know about positive psychology techniques is that they are energy producing, Manion says. “If managers use the principles of positive psychology—focusing on strengths, having vision, developing feedback, and creating relationships—they’ll have more energy, and their staff will have more energy,” she says.

She cites a couple of techniques outlined in The Engaged Workforce: an exercise called 3 Good Things (sidebar), and the practice of staff members doing acts of kindness for each other.

“For an OR, it would be powerful if every staff member did 3 nice things for others on the staff each week,” she said. “The ‘3 Good Things’ exercise also is helpful to lift the mood of the workplace.”

Manion adds that Seligman has studied optimism extensively and reports it can be learned.

Positive for negative

Manion includes specific steps for managers to learn to substitute the positive for the negative, both between manager and staff and among the staff.

“This is not ‘happiology’ but a researched and tested approach to better management and a happier, more productive workplace,” she told OR Manager. That includes proven strategies for handling staff with subpar performance and behavioral concerns.

“Influencing the performance of others is an important aspect of creating a positive work environment,” she says. “Influencing and managing performance and problem behavior are probably among the toughest challenges faced by organizational leaders,” Manion concedes. “Yet these are directly linked to the quality of work life for people in the organization and must be undertaken without fail. The pay-off is worth the effort.”

—Kate McGraw

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

Gratitude is an essential element in positive psychology, Jo Manion says. She has adapted for the workplace gratitude exercises proposed by positive psychology leader Martin E. Seligman.

The exercises include a “gratitude letter” and/or “gratitude visit” to persons who have been of benefit in a person’s life.

Here’s how the exercise works and how you can adapt it to your workplace.

**Gratitude exercise**

- Before going to bed, write down 3 good things, large or small, that went well that day.
- Next to each positive event, write an answer to this question: Why did this good thing happen?

Even over a short time such as a week, this activity has been found to increase participants’ perception of their happiness and reduce depressive symptoms for as long as 6 months, Seligman reports.

At work, Manion says managers have used the exercise at the beginning or end of a shift, for instance, or at the beginning of a work week (“What 3 things went well last week?”) or when they end meetings (“What is 1 good thing you appreciate about the time we have just spent together?”).