COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

By Paige Hector, LMSW

Do Staff in Your Facility Have a Job or a Role?

“Purpose is not about what we do and how fast we do it; but why we do it, and how we do it.” — Paolo Gallo

T he pandemic catapulted the post-acute and long-term care environment into multiple crises simultaneously, which made caring for our most vulnerable community members a monumental endeavor. The bandages of a largely dysfunctional system have been ripped off, and we are figuring out how to stem the bleeding long enough to create a functional health care system that not only serves the people who need care but also the caregivers themselves. As Professor David Grabowski has said, “We’ve overlooked and undervalued this workforce for a long time, and now we’re at a full-blown crisis” (Skilled Nursing News, Mar. 10, 2022, https://bit.ly/36GCeem).

In response, many leaders are trying to find meaningful ways to support staff well-being with strategies that include increased pay, extra paid days off, cards reading “I’ll be back in 15 minutes” to give staff permission to take breaks, employee-of-the-day recognition, thank-you cards for staff who have done nice things, and food — lots of food. But when the meal is over, the card is read, and the employee returns after a paid day off, has anything changed? Or is the facility culture still “business as usual”? Although these extrinsic strategies are welcomed and enjoyed by staff, they fall short of what’s needed to strengthen staff well-being and, ultimately, retention.

According to a webinar hosted by the Gerontological Society of America, even if a facility eliminates the influencing factors that lead to turnover, it doesn’t that mean staff will stay (“Common Data Elements for Workforce and Staffing in International Long-Term Care Research,” Sept. 3, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLdcdeUxhUs). This is in part because, despite all positive efforts, the staff still are being pushed to accommodate increased pay, extra paid days off, cards reading “I’ll be back in 15 minutes” to give staff permission to take breaks, employee-of-the-day recognition, thank-you cards for staff who have done nice things, and food — lots of food. But when the meal is over, the card is read, and the employee returns after a paid day off, has anything changed? Or is the facility culture still “business as usual”? Although these extrinsic strategies are welcomed and enjoyed by staff, they fall short of what’s needed to strengthen staff well-being and, ultimately, retention.

Choosing Differently

According to Davis Balestracci, an individual’s perception of the work environment is crucial (“Data Sanity: Statistical Thinking Applied to Everyday Data,” Medical Group Management Association, 2015). If staff’s perception is that they do not matter or that they do not belong, that is their daily reality. And what’s more, that perception influences the leadership’s reality as well. Balestracci teaches the concept of “bolted-on” versus “built-in” culture. Bolted-on cultures eventually rattle loose and fall off, risking staff frustration and, worse, cynicism. Built-in cultures are sustainable, woven into the facility cultural fabric.

How can we create a built-in culture that makes PALTC staff want to stay? The following are a few thought shifts that we can make to the ways that we perceive the problem in order to affect the ways that we see the solution. They will help us move from bolted-on strategies to built-in strategies.

One: Extrinsic Versus Intrinsic Motivation

We can choose to create facility cultures where intrinsic motivation can thrive, forgetting extrinsic motivational factors like stars, rewards, and the looming fear of discipline. Intrinsic motivation is entirely different than doing something out of fear, competition, or being shamed with discipline. Intrinsic motivation is driven by human needs for purpose, fun, learning, belonging, self-knowledge, and passion. When we do things because we genuinely love to, we bring our full self to the experience. Working with staff to understand and create intrinsic motivation is an important part of the process.

Two: Job Versus Role

You may recall the story of two stonecutters: when asked what they are doing, the first says, “I’m cutting this stone into blocks,” and the second says, “I’m on a team building a cathedral.” Similarly, this difference between a job and a role applies to the current staffing crisis in long-term care.

What would staff say if they were asked what they do at your facility? Would they respond with their title and job description? I’m a nurse. I work nights. I do admissions. I order supplies.

I pass meds. I organize activities. I drive patients to appointments. I’m a manager. I take care of residents on the 100 floor. I clean rooms. Just like the first stonecutter, they list their job duties.

Or would the staff share their role in the facility: I belong on a team dedicated to improving the quality of life for people who live here.

The difference between a job and a role is that a person with a role has a purpose. Beginning to understand what creates a sense of purpose for individual staff members can help define their roles within the team.

Three: Business as Usual Versus Meeting Human Needs

If we are going to transform nursing homes into rewarding and joyful places to work, places where people are paid fairly and have the resources they need to step fully into their roles, we need to cultivate communities with a sense of purpose: in which each person, no matter his or her job description, is part of a team. We need to shift from thinking about the facility as a mere business (run by extrinsic motivations such as financial reward and star ratings) to an organization that also meets the human needs of both residents and staff. We need to continually strive to meet our needs for contribution, belonging, community, and purpose, and rebuild our nursing homes together as organizations that co-hold business and human needs.

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