

Employee Retention: How One Rural Hospital Excels

In some respects, Monroe County Hospital is a typical rural critical access hospital with 25 beds, a \$12 million budget, a medical staff of four, and a 25-year-old building. Yet, Monroe has reduced employee turnover from 26 percent to 9.5 percent and doubled cash in the bank from \$1 to \$2 million.

The hospital accomplished all of this while achieving a near non-existent nosocomial infection rate and improving patient satisfaction from the 48th to the 98th percentile over the past five years, as measured by Press-Caney surveys. As a result, workers compensation claims are steadily decreasing at Monroe (while they are rising at most other Iowa hospitals), and the hospital is able to finance a large portion of a \$5.5 million renovation.

"When you get the right people in your organization, the right things happen," explains Monroe's CEO Greg Paris. "It's an owner versus a renter mentality. Everyone here looks out for our organization instead of just for themselves."

The Secret

It's culture. To lay the foundation for a culture of high employee retention and ownership, successful leaders use behaviors specifically designed to build mutual respect, trust, and respond to the needs of employees, says Paris. In other words, leaders walk the talk.

Here are some strategies for building a positive culture:

Develop and enforce employee standards of behavior. At Monroe, every employee that is hired signs a document saying they agree to abide by Monroe's 29 standards of behaviors as a condition of employment. One of these standards is "We will

always knock before entering an office or patient room."

"We developed this list of behaviors as a team," says Paris. "We agreed that if we're going to be excellent, we will do certain things like walking visitors to their destination because it creates a culture of service and friendliness."

Peer interview. At Monroe, the behavior standards are used as an initial screening tool. Potential employees are not given a job application until they agree to follow the standards. Human resources and managers interview potential employees. But the final hiring decision comes from the people who best understand what type of person will be successful: peers. "It's not a rubber stamp process," says Paris. "I know because all three candidates I've forwarded for an assistant administrator position haven't passed."

Create transparency. Communication is a high priority. Managers at Monroe share the good and the bad with employees, as well as the community. Log on to the hospital's website (www.mchalia.com) to see the hospital's year-to-date performance and goals for employee and patient satisfaction. The same results are posted around the hospital so staff can see how they are doing.

Emphasize service recovery. There are no excuses for bad service at Monroe. All

employees are empowered to spend up to \$1,500 to do whatever it takes to make something right for patients, including making a call to the business office to ensure a patient doesn't get billed for a CT scan. Monroe's AAA service recovery asks employees to acknowledge the error, apologize, and make amends.

Service recovery toolboxes with stuffed bears, grocery store gift certificates, movie tickets, and other gifts are located at key areas around the facility. Employees are empowered to give these gifts to patients as a way of making amends.

"I hear stories all the time when I'm out in the community about how we care enough to make it right when someone had to wait for a doctor or experienced a frustration," says Paris.

Make discharge phone calls. Every emergency department, inpatient, and same-day surgery patient gets a call from someone at Monroe who cared for them. Sometimes the calls catch a clinical issue that might have otherwise gone undetected, such as an infection on a surgical site. These calls improve quality care, decrease risk, and provide opportunity for quick service recovery. Equally important, says Paris, the phone calls help caregivers see their work as worthwhile, which is a driver for creating a culture of service and operational excellence.

Employees Are Having More Fun

"Seven or eight years ago, my job just wasn't that much fun," says Paris. "But our cultural change has really put the sun back into health care for all of us at Monroe. I know we're going to do serious work, but we have fun and enjoy our jobs. I credit that to the turnaround in our culture." ☎

Greg Paris is CEO of Monroe County Hospital in Albia, IA (gparis@mchalia.com).