Charge Nurses: Investing in the Future

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The military follows the principle that leaders are made, not born. Unit leaders are highly trained and mentored for the roles they will eventually assume. Much like non-commissioned military officers, charge nurses are small unit tactical leaders who should be considered the backbone of high-quality healthcare organizations. And yet, we in healthcare too often throw our clinical nurses into leadership positions that are highly complex, stressful and critical to the success of a unit — with little or no preparation.

For years, many in healthcare have believed the premise that a good clinical nurse must also be a good leader. But this is not always true. Placing clinical nurses into leadership situations for which they are unprepared results in poor unit communication, difficult physician relations, declining employee and patient satisfaction, and a lack of discipline and unit cohesiveness. But with today’s emphasis on clinical quality and patient safety, training for our most fundamental level of nursing management is often ignored in favor of initiatives that appear to yield more tangible results.

Let’s talk about tangible results. When you consider the costs of recruiting and orientation, it costs approximately $60,000 to replace a nurse — not to mention the impact that a nursing shortage has on other unit nurses and patient safety. In addition, poorly functioning units led by unprepared, overly stressed charge nurses can
have a dire impact on quality of care. Such units can contribute to hospital-acquired infections, which cost an average of $35,000 to $40,000 to treat. Implementing a charge nurse training program seems a small price to pay to help ensure patient safety and improved employee satisfaction.

There is another long-term impact to consider: by placing our promising future leaders into situations for which they are not prepared, we often taint their views toward a career in nursing leadership — the effects of which healthcare organizations will feel for years to come. Even though most future executive nurse leaders begin their careers as charge nurses, many healthcare organizations have no succession plans in place. Such plans typically include assessments, training and planning that identify early on which nurses would truly make good leaders, versus those who would not.

Other industries invest heavily in their future leaders through internal leadership programs, post-graduate studies and other similar initiatives. Yet some in healthcare are willing to promote nurses to charge nurse positions who have no idea — and have not been properly taught — how to run an effective unit. And all of this — in an industry where the stakes could not be higher.

The Benefits of Charge Nurse Training
Highly trained charge nurses add considerable value to their hospitals and can also help the organization avoid costly pitfalls. Adequately trained and prepared charge nurses are particularly beneficial to nurse managers, who appreciate and value having a trained team with which to work. Charge nurses can act as a second set of eyes on busy, chaotic units. They can be on the alert for any patient safety issues, for example. Other benefits of charge nurse training include:

**Improved Patient and Staff Satisfaction** — A well-trained charge nurse has a positive impact on both patient and employee satisfaction. Multiple studies have shown that employees cite their relationships with their supervisors as the most important predictor of employee satisfaction. Charge nurses may have a greater impact on staff satisfaction than any other nurse leader, due to their close and continuous contact with nursing staff. Because they are on the front line when dealing with patients and family members, their role is critical to patient satisfaction.

**Reduced Nurse Turnover** — Improving nurse turnover rates has many positive financial implications for healthcare organizations. When a seasoned nurse leaves a facility, that facility loses all the orientation, training and education investment it has made during that nurse's tenure. Even worse, a nurse often takes that knowledge to a competitor that benefits from the hospital's original investment. Due to the nursing shortage, the gap left when a nurse departs is often filled with overtime or expensive agency nurses. An effective charge nurse leader can positively impact nursing turnover by improving the work environment for nurses using proven leadership strategies to retain the best staff.

**Reduced Risk** — A well-trained, vigilant charge nurse can reduce risk and improve quality considerably on his or her unit. Risks on the nursing unit apply not only to patients, but also to staff and visiting family members. The costs associated with nosocomial infections, medical errors and falls can run into the...
millions. Furthermore, recent Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services reimbursement changes regarding avoidable medical errors will result in higher costs as hospitals begin to absorb the full cost of managing avoidable medical mistakes.

**Improved Strategic Outcomes** — Charge nurses are key to the successful implementation of hospital strategies and ensuring that the organization’s mission, vision and values are translated into action on the nursing floor. When charge nurses are properly trained, the skills they have developed are then translated into tangible results with a real, lasting impact on the organization.

**Charge Nurse Training Turns a Struggling Unit Around**

B. E. Smith recently partnered with a patient care unit that desperately needed charge nurse training. The staff was not committed, there was a lack of trust between the staff and management, and the charge nurses did not understand their roles as front-line managers.

The nurses were the least satisfied of all the hospital’s units, according to an employee satisfaction survey. B. E. Smith sent in a seasoned nurse executive to perform an assessment tailored specifically to the organization. She then used that information to customize both the approach and presentation of the unit’s curriculum.

Because the nurse executive felt that the key to turning the unit around was to educate the charge nurses as to their roles on the management team, she implemented a charge nurse training program focused on changing the culture through improved communication, addressing inappropriate behavior and helping the charge nurses better understand their roles as educators.

When unit employees were surveyed again seven months later, the results were dramatically different. Satisfaction increased in every category — more than doubling in some cases. For example, responses to the question, “I respect the abilities of the person to whom I report,” originally scored a 2.21 on a five-point scale, but increased to 4.42 just seven months later. Unit satisfaction levels even surpassed the overall hospital satisfaction score in the second survey.

This healthcare organization was willing to invest in its charge nurse leaders, and as a result, employee satisfaction greatly improved and the environment is safer and more conducive to patient healing.
What Makes B. E. Smith’s Charge Nurse Training Different?

Next to having no charge nurse training, the biggest mistake healthcare organizations make is confining charge nurse training and preparation to classroom instruction. Afterward, they send the charge nurses out to fend for themselves, with the expectation that they are prepared to face the monumental challenges of running a unit. At B. E. Smith, our experience indicates that learning is best achieved through a combination of didactic training sessions, coupled with dedicated coaching and mentoring.

Our nurse executives each have more than 20 years of experience. They understand the challenges nurse leaders face each day and know what it takes to overcome those hurdles.

We take great care in assigning exactly the right nurse executive to your organization. He or she will first perform a customized assessment to identify issues that need to be addressed. Following the assessment, the nurse executive will design a core curriculum tailored to your hospital’s specific needs. The nurse executive then spends time on the ground teaching, coaching, advising and evaluating your charge nurse staff.

We craft individualized development plans for each trainee and monitor his or her progress, and we coach nurses individually as situations develop on the unit. More than 70 percent of instruction and learning takes place in one-on-one situations and challenges encountered directly on the nursing unit. This is the essence of B. E. Smith’s charge nurse training — capturing the “teachable moments” that occur during unit training. These moments are missed in classroom training — and yet they are critical in helping charge nurses reach their full potential.

Our nurse executive will evaluate each trainee at the end of the engagement, sharing the evaluations with the unit manager and senior nursing leadership. Each trainee will be ranked as 1) fully competent for the role, 2) needs additional development, with a specific plan prepared or 3) not appropriate for a leadership role at this time.