Improve your environment through communication and change

By Cindy Lefton, RN, PhD

When Linda agreed to become nurse manager for the floor of a major teaching hospital, she had no illusions that turning around this “war zone,” as she describes it, would be easy. Nurses were using street language in front of patients. Staff members yelled at each other. Patients routinely wrote complaints about the staff. In other words, respect, teamwork, and accountability were scarce.

These interpersonal problems seemed at odds with the hospital’s prestigious medical reputation. It was regularly ranked as one of the ten best hospitals in America. Yet, Linda was the eighth nurse manager on her floor within 8 years. This lack of continuity made it difficult to establish a culture where effective communication, teamwork, or collaboration could grow. However, it was important for Linda to try. She knew that patients would suffer from an unhealthy environment.

Her assessment is easily validated. Research states that relationship issues are real obstacles to the development of work environments in which patients and their families can receive safe, excellent care. Inattention to work relationships creates obstacles that may become the root cause of medical errors, hospital-acquired infections, and other complications.¹

Successful strategies
Like Linda, you may want to change a destructive atmosphere in your organization to help provide the best possible patient care. To cultivate a healthier, team-oriented environment, begin by making an honest appraisal of your situation. Talk with people who’ll speak frankly. Then, estimate how long it’ll take. You may not get everything you need, but doing something is better than doing nothing.

It’ll take a lot of work. Early on, Linda’s team worked 12- to 14-hour days. That included the assistant nurse managers for the three divisions on her floor and their assistants. Members were often paged at home to deal with issues. Progress was slow, but the effort was worth it. Here’s an overview of some of their successful strategies that can serve as a framework for change:

1. Gain the administration’s support. If you can’t attain it at the highest level, get the backing of those immediately above you. You want them to go to bat for you with their own bosses. Linda was fortunate to gain support from her director and CNE. Be prepared to sell your ideas of what you hope to accomplish and how you plan to go about it. All you’re asking for now is to be allowed to move forward. When your efforts are backed by the administration, people will take notice.

2. Have an overall plan, but be very flexible implementing it. Linda and her leadership team formulated some sizable goals: raise standards of professional behavior, build trust, improve communication, and develop leadership skills. They tied these to specific action steps.

However, it was equally imperative to adjust the plan when ideas weren’t working and to develop feasible alternatives. After the launch of her plan, Linda had a new director and CNE, and a new division was added to her floor. You can’t expect your environment to remain static. Besides, you want to be open to incorporating valuable feedback that you’ll only receive after trying out ideas. Several sprang from Linda’s program itself, such as

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developing a mission statement for the floor, and later, holding a progressive dinner on the premises to celebrate the camaraderie among divisions that had blossomed.

3. **Be proactive, highly involved, and have an open-door policy.** Early on, a hallmark of Linda’s strategy was lots of one-to-one coaching. When management or staff members had issues with each other, a corner of Linda’s office became the new focal point to sort out disagreements and confrontations. These sessions were the key to building trust and turning things around because they served as a model for airing differences and solving problems in constructive ways. If inappropriate behavior was identified, verbal coaching was given. The second time, more coaching was attempted. Persistent poor behavior resulted in formal documentation and corrective action.

   So, be accessible. Make people feel comfortable coming to your office, but don’t spend all of your time there. Get out and walk around as well. And walk the talk by modeling appropriate behavior.

4. **Practice “relentless consistency.”** One reason for emphasizing individual coaching was to define a consistent pattern of acceptable behavior. Linda’s CNE coined the phrase “relentless consistency” to indicate that a high level of professionalism and care would be expected from everyone. When staff members could see that these standards would apply under any circumstances, it became clear to them that they were entering a new era.

5. **Build from a base of support among your staff.** Virtually every significant change initiative starts with a genuine partnership among a small number of deeply committed individuals. Linda’s core group of nurses and staff, who were dedicated to changing the floor’s climate, became the seed to grow what she dubbed a “people skills army” among the staff population. These frontline caregivers were committed to improving communication and collaboration as the key to improving the hospital environment.

   Equally significant, some staff members were asked to leave the floor. Even after extensive coaching, they wouldn’t commit to the changes being introduced. Those were hard decisions, given the fact that staffing was always a problem. But some people proved themselves “infectious” and weren’t allowed to contaminate the culture.

6. **Get formal training when needed.** Even if everyone had supported the program, Linda’s leadership team realized that key people would require formal training to learn needed interpersonal skills.
All nurse managers and their charge nurses were enrolled in a 3-day seminar on leadership through people skills. Nurse managers discussed their real-life problem situations and practiced effective strategies. In addition, over the next several years, 120 other employees among the RNs, techs, and secretaries attended a 1-day workshop on critical collaboration. It was similar to the 3-day seminar, but it only pulled staff away from one shift.

With these additions to the people skills army, the strategy was producing positive results. Constructive dialogue and better role-modeling were occurring more frequently. Linda’s team began trying to reach the next level, in which staff members hold each other accountable for behavior. It’s a difficult goal point to reach, but significant. If staff members feel they belong to a team, they don’t want to let each other down. That’s how a tradition begins.

7. Be patient and roll with the punches. Linda’s environment wasn’t changed in a day. The level of patient complaints didn’t decrease for a long time. So, it may take you a while to reverse direction. Changing behavior isn’t easy, but once the process takes hold, momentum will build.

8. Celebrate successes. Changing a work environment is always a work in progress. Whatever your starting point, celebrate successes along the way. In spite of some backsliding, Linda’s floor could point to milestones. Comments from patients became more complimentary. At one point, satisfaction scores for the floor were the highest for the entire hospital. Slowly, the atmosphere became much less tense. Conversation in the lounge lightened up. Staff members felt safe voicing concerns. Issues were addressed rather than being allowed to smolder.

Of course, your own situation is unique. However, to whatever degree you pursue positive change, remember the most important difference on Linda’s floor was that the quality of patient care improved. That is, and should be, your greatest concern—and your greatest reward.

REFERENCES

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