

Marketing Matters



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This month's topic—Employee Retention—is like a two-ounce drink of water in the middle of the Sahara desert: You definitely need it, you're glad it's there, but you wish it were two gallons rather than two ounces. I asked our Fearless Leader, the Executive Director of HOPE, if I could have 6 pages of the newsletter: She raised her eyebrow, smiled, told me to dream on, and suggested I write a second Toolkit if I needed more space. Eventually I might do just that—but in the meantime, let's talk about Employee Retention!

It's a dog-eat-hospice world out there: Don't look out the window, but as you're reading this I'm in your parking lot putting flyers under the windshield wipers of every car that say "NOW HIRING! Hospice Nurses, Social Workers, Administrators, and more—Generous Compensation, Top-Notch Benefits, Flexible Schedules! Information Session this Tuesday at noon at the Concord Park Inn; Don't Miss This!!!" I told you not to look out the window; this is a hypothetical scenario, albeit one based on reality. If you think people can't do this—or shouldn't—you're ignoring the fact that they might go ahead and do it regardless of what you think. If the competition for patients is fierce in some areas, so is the competition for staff. And if you count yourself as lucky enough not to have experienced this kind of fierce competition in your area yet, things might just change before too long. For the time being, your staff may still be recruited by hospices in another county or another state.

Some of those competitors may be predatory, intending to start a new hospice down the road from yours, looking for experienced staff already in the area, and engage in recruitment practices that range from illegal to merely unscrupulous. Others may just be hospices with vacancies that hire "head hunters" to fill specific important positions and recruit for them anywhere in the country, or even hospices that advertise position openings online and any of your staff may see the ad and apply for the job. Either way, one thing is absolutely certain: Someone, somewhere, wants your very best employees to work for *them* instead of you—be it a nurse, a CFO, an office administrator or any other staff member you deem exceptional.

Now all you have to do is figure out how to retain employees whose excellence you can't afford to lose. This is not *always* the case, but at least most of

the time people who are in a happy relationship don't actively look around for other options. They're likely to reject other offers, even very attractive offers, when those come about, out of a sense of loyalty and commitment to their present partner. It happens on an interpersonal level, and it happens on a professional level as well. You are in a relationship with your employees, and it's up to you to make sure that the relationship is seen as serious rather than casual by both you and your staff. You're also responsible for doing everything within your power to ensure that the relationship is one that's both mutually beneficial and happy for both parties. That automatically creates barriers for those who want to recruit your staff; not insurmountable barriers, but formidable barriers all the same. Some predators may think of you as too much trouble, and may opt to look for easier prey somewhere else. Some may try to steal your staff but fail, wasting time and resources in the process.

There are many factors that affect your ability to retain employees, and they're all very important to consider since many among your staff are very difficult to replace (due to shortages), expensive to replace (due to the higher salaries commanded by new employees in high-demand fields), and complicated to replace (due to the lesser experience their replacements may have). Employee Retention is not just the business of your Human Resource Department; it's something that heavily involves Senior Leadership, all Managers, many other staff members across your hospice, and in some instances your Board. This, too, requires Strategic Thinking, Strategic Planning, and a lot of Marketing: Don't forget that Marketing functions don't always target people "outside" your hospice, like referral sources, prospective patients, volunteers, and others. Internal Marketing is just as important, and it can make a crucial difference in Employee Retention.

When I counted all the different topics covered in my employee retention presentations, I came up with 34, though I could easily add half a dozen more to the current list. Clearly it's a complicated issue—and so it should be, given its importance for healthcare organizations in general and hospices in particular. So where do you start?

You take a step back and realize that Employee Retention shouldn't happen at any cost. "Any cost" can be too high a cost. There are employees whose presence in the organization can be demoralizing to the hardest working staff you have, and whose poor skills, attitude and behavior actually hurt rather than help your hospice as a whole. Sometimes they can be retrained—and retained, and sometimes you're better off without them. Those employees, however, are by far the exception at most hospices I've worked with. In almost every single case, your staff really is your most valuable resource. It's the most expensive, but most indispensable resource too. Think of how we treat stuff—things we have at home—that we consider our "most valuable, most expensive and most indispensable" possessions: We handle them with care, cherish them, show them off, enjoy having them around, appreciate them, and feel a great sense of loss even at the very thought of parting with them. Why would we treat our employees, who after all are far more precious than "stuff," with any lesser sense of significance and value?

Your management style, your compensation structure, the recognition you provide to your employees, the value you place on their opinion and the frequency

with which you measure their satisfaction, the resources you provide to them, the leadership, the vision, are only some of the factors that affect your Employee Retention (fewer than 34 or 40 factors, but still a good start). Remember that “we do good work, and therefore patients will appreciate us, will be happy, word will get around, and we’ll always be in demand” is simply a fallacy. So is “we’re a good place to work, the work itself is rewarding, so our staff will always want to work here and take care of our patients.” When retention becomes a problem, life is already more complicated than it ought to be—and an ounce of prevention, as we all know, is worth a great many pounds of cure. Whether you’re experiencing retention problems or are working hard to prevent them, know that your efforts are well worth the time and resources you invest in them. We often ask “where would we be without patients?” but chances are it’d still be a better position than we’d be in without extraordinary staff.