Healthy Work Environments

The Manager’s Role in a Healthy Work Environment

The medical-surgical nurse manager’s role in providing a healthy work environment is vital. The manager’s leadership style has a direct impact on making this successful. The authentic leader is emerging as the one necessary in today’s nursing world to establish a healthy work environment.

What does a medical-surgical nursing staff need from a nurse leader? What type of leadership is required to successfully position the medical-surgical nursing unit as a healthy work environment for staff? How can a nurse manager support nursing staff? Although a distinction can be made between the terms leadership and management, for the purpose of this article, these titles will be used interchangeably.

A healthy work environment is one that supports and fosters excellence in patient care. Increasing evidence shows that unhealthy work environments contribute to medical errors, ineffective care delivery, and conflict and stress among health professionals (American Association of Critical Care Nurses [AACN], 2005). The medical-surgical nurse manager is a critical component in promoting a healthy work environment.

Nurse managers who are strong advocates for developing a healthy work environment may be viewed as risk-takers. The workplace is an important setting for the nursing leader to address the mental, physical, social, and economic welfare of employees (Tomey, 2009). One of a nurse manager’s responsibilities is to create a positive work environment for employees, one where nursing staff are excited to come to work.

Geeley (2006) suggests the following tips to assist a nurse manager in setting the tone for a positive work environment:

- Create an environment where humor is encouraged.
- Create a true open door policy.
- Ensure unit values and expectations are clear.
- Keep the environment simple and the work area orderly and uncluttered.
- Recognize volunteerism.

Part of providing a healthy work environment includes appropriate staffing levels. This not only includes nurse-to-patient ratios, but also matching patient acuity with the medical-surgical nurses’ competencies (AACN, 2005).

AACN (2005) identified authentic leadership as one of the six standards for creating and sustaining a healthy work environment. Shirey (2006) described authentic leaders as people who understand their own purpose and remain true to their core values. Authentic leaders set the example and then role model ethical behavior. Authentic leaders value staff involvement in decision making, whether in work design and flow or creating trust.

The nurse manager’s support in creating fair and just cultures of safety is central to promoting and sustaining a healthy work environment. Cultures that allow for human error in correcting system problems also hold people responsible for reckless behavior. Quality outcomes which are desired by managers are measured by monitoring medication errors, fall prevention practices, and system processes. Supporting the front line medical-surgical nursing staff will ensure quality outcomes in a healthy work environment. If the work culture is viewed as fair and just, nursing staff are more likely to report errors and near-misses. However, if the staff view the reporting of errors in processes as people-focused and/or associated with blame or punishment, employees are less likely to report events. Unreported events may contribute to continued process failures of the same nature and serve as a missed opportunity to create an atmosphere for the staff to contribute to a safe and healthy workplace (Marx, 2001).

The most important element to a healing environment for patients is medical-surgical nurses who have a positive work environment (Stichler, 2009). Nurse managers must set the standard for healthy work environments for staff, which in turn, provides for quality outcomes for the institution. As pay-for-performance looms on the horizon, these same quality outcomes will become the institutions’ bottom line. Thus, if a healthy work environment prevails, everyone will benefit.

References


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