Healthy Work Environments

Building a Healthy Workplace? Start with the Foundation of Positive Working Relationships

Anyone who has been involved in the building of a house knows the importance of a solid foundation. Without a firm foundation, the rest of the structure is weak and likely destined for an early demise or at least significant problems. In the same way, a healthy work environment needs to have a strong foundation and the first step is the formation of healthy working relationships.

The health care work environment is rife with problematic relationships. The fast-paced nature of a busy medical-surgical unit, a stretched-thin staff, heightened emotions of patients and their family members, as well as the tremendous complexity of the contemporary hospital is enough to create a cauldron of seething human emotion. These issues account for the focus of many articles on bullying behaviors, lateral violence, dealing with conflict and coping with difficult people. There is no doubt that today's nurse must become adept at dealing with these issues.

This article will not focus on what needs to be eliminated in order to create a healthy workplace, but rather address some positive strategies medical-surgical nurses can implement to build a healthy work environment. Medical-surgical nurses need to proactively, deliberately, and consciously create a strong foundation of healthy working relationships in their work group and department.

Why Are Relationships So Important?

Almost all groups identifying criteria that delineate a healthy workplace include at least one, if not more, criteria that are related to positive relationships. For example, teamwork and collaboration are often cited, yet neither of these can exist in the absence of functional, positive relationships. Authentic leadership is suggested as one criterion for a healthy workplace, yet leadership only exists within a relationship. The relationship sets the context for the leader's effectiveness (Manion, 2011). Other factors thought to comprise a healthy workplace are not enough in the absence of unhealthy working relationships. For example, it does not matter how much you are paid for your work if your work relationships are dysfunctional, unpleasant, and even painful; this workplace cannot be described as healthy. The presence of healthy relationships may not be sufficient to guarantee a healthy work environment; yet without good working relationships, no workplace can be described as healthy.

What is a Healthy Working Relationship?

Reviewing a description of a healthy relationship may cause one to feel like he or she is back in Fundamentals of Nursing or Psychology 101 courses in nursing school. However, it is amazing how little attention is given to relationships in health care work-places today. If you ask your colleagues, “Who is responsible for the quality of relationships in this work group?” far too many will answer, “It’s the manager’s job.” Many employees believe if they have a problem with a co-worker, someone from another department, or a physician, the first step is to take the issue to the unit or department manager for resolution. And in some cases, a manager may encourage this behavior for various reasons. The truth is that every employee is personally and individually responsible for creating and maintaining healthy working relationships with everyone else at the job site. There will be times when a manager or a more experienced colleague can be a coach, but individuals need to accept responsibility and expect co-workers to accept personal responsibility for positive and quality relationships.

Within a work group, it is very powerful to have meaningful and authentic conversations about how you define a healthy work relationship. Here are four elements of a healthy relationship (Manion, 2011):

- Trust
- Respect
- Support
- Communication

If any of these elements are missing, the relationship is one that needs attention. Let us briefly describe each of these in the context of the workplace.

Trust means that one can rely on the integrity of something or someone. Competence, congruency, and constancy are three important aspects of trust. We trust someone when we believe they are capable, knowledgeable, qualified, and willing to do what it is we expect of them. As co-workers, we agree to behave in ways that demonstrate congruency with what we have said is important. Constancy (which includes availability and accessibility) means we are there for each other. Trust also includes believing co-workers will deliver on their promises. Trustworthy individuals are often described as dependable and relatively predictable in behavior. One does not have to guess each morning which personality a co-worker is going to exhibit at work that day!

Respect is the unconditional regard we have for each other because all human beings have a contribution to make to the world. Respect is not based on superficial attributes such as socioeconomic status, educational level and the number of credentials earned, tenure, title, or position. This doesn’t mean to imply that one does not respect an individual who has some of these things, but instead that one does not withhold respect from someone without these attributes. Unfortunately, in many workplaces, respect is offered conditionally and one can hear it in remarks such as, “Well, you’re just a CNA (certified nursing assistant)” or, “When you’ve been here as long I have, then I’ll listen to your opinion!” These types of remarks and accompanying behavior are a clear message of disrespect to the recipient.

Support of each other must be unconditional. In other words, support is offered even when you make a mistake or are uncertain and feeling vulnerable. In a healthy relationship, one can count on the support of the other person. Maisel and Gable (2009) found that an important aspect of feeling supported occurs when the other person is positive and encouraging when negative events occur. This finding is not a surprise. However, these authors also found that how we respond to other people’s good news is just as
important in terms of whether the individual feels supported or not. For example, the co-worker who excitedly tells you about being asked to chair a major committee will feel unsupported when you respond in a cynical and negative voice, saying, “What a waste of your time and effort. Those committees never really accomplish anything anyway. They just eat up time and energy.” It’s obvious that the negative remarks will dampen the other person’s enthusiasm for the new role. Perhaps even more interesting, Maisel and Gable (2009) found that if one simply responds with lukewarm enthusiasm and/or a bit of disinterest, your co-worker is still going to feel unsupported. A medical-surgical nurse is often better off having a day when nothing good happens than having a day when something extraordinary occurs but he or she gets a lackluster response when the good news is shared with co-workers.

Communication is the fourth element of a healthy working relationship. Communication must be honest, open, direct, and predominantly positive in nature. Fredrickson (2009) identified the actual numerical ratio of positive to negative interactions required for an individual to feel they are supported and flourishing. Other researchers have substantiated this 3:1 mathematical ratio. A healthy relationship means a person will receive three positive responses for one negative response. No one lives a life without any negatives. It is appropriate to grieve when one suffers the loss of a loved one or to feel angry when someone betrays you or lets you down. In work groups, the 3:1 ratio of positive to negative communication needs to be increased to 10:1 for relationships to thrive. In the presence of a higher positive to negative ratio, teams are stronger, problems are easier to solve, and work relationships are far more productive.

What Can I Do?

So what can a medical-surgical nurse do to build strong, healthy relationships in the workplace? Here are a few tips:

- Take the initiative and begin by evaluating the quality of your working relationships against the four essential elements of trust, respect, support, and communication.
- Initiate a conversation within your work group about what these four concepts mean and what behaviors demonstrate trust, respect, support, and communication. For instance, members of the group may agree that they will not talk about group members who are absent (a sign of support and loyalty).
- Develop a “Code of Conduct” within your work group that everyone agrees to support. Many organizations have established a Code of Conduct with expectations such as being kind and courteous to others, or being on time for work. The Code of Conduct needs to be individualized and implemented at the work group level or the employees will not have the same level of ownership as upper levels of leadership.
- Agree to a zero tolerance policy in your department for behaviors that undermine healthy working relationships (such as gossip, overly aggressive behavior, chronic complaining, behavior that is demeaning to others, etc.).
- Increase your positive to negative ratios. If there is a lot of inherent negativity in your department (because of pace, intensity of patient needs, difficult patient conditions, etc.), you and your co-workers need to be diligent about looking for ways to increase positivity.

- Pay attention to how you and your co-workers respond to each other’s good news. Make certain your response and behavior is actively positive.

A healthy workplace does not just happen. It takes deliberate and positive intention on the part of everyone who works there. In the beginning, everyone may not be on board with improving relationships. However, actively working with colleagues who are interested in making your workplace better will pay off. Gradually, your success will build momentum and those with extreme negativity and dysfunctional relationships will move on if they are unable to find fertile ground for their destructive behavior. Make healthy relationships part of your department goals and continually evaluate the quality of your relationships so if there is a problem it can be tackled immediately.

References

Suggested Reading

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