

Mining Healthcare Gold

By

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Where do you find healthcare gold?

In Jack and the Beanstalk, the mythical beanstalk grows and allows Jack to enter a mysterious world of peril and adventure, the land of the Giant and his extraordinary riches. Within this land is a goose that lays golden eggs.

Healthcare managers have something in common with this situation. We too live with peril and adventure. We also have golden geese, but don't often recognize them, because our golden geese come disguised as nurses. Many managers consider nurses to be just another expense. But they are really assets, healthcare gold.

That's because we acquire so much information. We live in the information age when accurate data are invaluable. During conversations with nurses, patients communicate their perspectives about company image and necessary services. .

Healthcare management has slashed staff instead of performing the precise surgery needed to decrease waste. In effect, they killed many of the golden geese. When many nurses couldn't survive in the new environment, they either burned out or found other careers.

Organizations should seek the input of experienced nurses to learn how to eliminate waste without adverse effects. Part of the solution is to promote versatility by cross training. But managers need nurses' input for those changes to succeed.

Do you value your gold?

For many years, organizations have taken nurse availability for granted. Now, many facilities are losing important opportunities. The nursing shortage has forced some hospitals and nursing homes

to close some facilities or delay launching new services. Managers have reacted to the recent healthcare crunch by asking nurses to perform more and more tasks. It's as if they would like to program nurses to function like robots. This behavior is demeaning to many of our important contributions: our judgment, skill and compassion.

The development of sub-acute facilities is a good example of how hospitals and other healthcare organizations lost a marketing opportunity when they didn't talk to nurses. Companies that first opened sub-acute units created a business caring for patients who had no place to go. These patients were too acute for long-term or home care, but did not meet the criterion for continued hospitalization. Nurses and social workers had expressed frustration because placement was difficult. Hospitals didn't realize that such problems could be golden opportunities to offer new services. They could have opened sub-acute units first if they had collaborated with their nurses.

Nurses are good at recognizing high-risk situations. Unsafe staffing is alarming, but we can't act because we have no power. Sometimes, management only needs to rearrange staff. A nurses' perspective could improve safety without increasing expense, but our voices aren't heard.

Although nurses notice high-risk situations, they can't always correct them. Sometimes a powerful person blocks our efforts. Other times, the chain of command in bureaucracies is too long. Then management loses the opportunity to correct problems in time. With more autonomy, nurses could help their organizations avoid expensive legal involvement.

Staff Friendly Cultures

Management should mine healthcare gold by creating staff friendly cultures to attract and retain qualified nurses. What are some of the characteristics of a staff friendly culture?

First, Managers should avoid using fear and punishment for discipline. If someone makes a mistake, he or she should be taught

how to correct the error. When many people make the same error, staff friendly cultures look within their own system for the cause.

Second, both manager and staff must have healthy senses of humor. Humor is used to relieve stress, communicate, and even correct unsatisfactory behavior. Humor also increases patient satisfaction. Patients sometimes comment, "We love it when the nurses laugh with each other."

Third, staff should be given autonomy and expected to make decisions at the patient level. For example, when staff uncover a problem, they use their own judgment to solve it. Then they inform the manager about the situation. This practice increases quality and saves time. However, good staff know which situations require the advice of management immediately.

Forth, employee innovations should be implemented immediately. Staff members feel validated when they see their ideas put into practice. Quality increases dramatically when staff create a continuous stream of small improvements.

Fifth, managers should use a generous amount of praise and appreciation in staff friendly cultures because it motivates people to produce even better work.

Mine more gold

Instead of killing the golden geese, management should nurture them. The nursing shortage could be management's golden opportunity to collaborate with its staff. Organizations will be able to operate and expand without being hampered by staffing constraints. Consider adopting this new gold standard.

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From Healthcare Review: April 30 - June 4, 2001

