

Support Each Other

By

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Nursing is stressful. We have too much work, too little control over that work and not enough help from each other. Abundant mutual support can help to resolve all three problems.

Too much work? Create high-performance teams.

While working on a high performance team for over five years, we were able to accomplish more with less effort.

- We were autonomous
- We seldom experienced stress
- We gave invaluable help to each other.

Our high-performance team included all of the staff, not just nurses. Nurses sometimes have an "every man for himself" attitude. That doesn't work anymore. The best way to provide the safest, highest quality nursing care is to work together.

The nurses helped each other during busy times. The CNA's helped the secretary, the nurses helped the CNA's and we all worked as hard as we could no matter whose job it was. In the end, the workload evened out fairly.

Suppose you have five admissions during one shift. While the RN is assessing the patients, the secretary or CNA can orient the patients to the unit and the CNA can help the secretary assemble the charts. Later, the secretary may be swamped with orders. The RN can note extra orders or enter them into the computer.

High performance teams prepare the unit to manage unexpected

staffing problems. For example, one time, all of the licensed staff on one shift except one RN and one LPN were sick for a week. The RN was able to manage the unit with less licensed staff by delegating in a different way. Within legal limitations, certain parts of the admission process and other work usually assigned to licensed staff can be assigned to non-licensed staff. It gave us flexibility without sacrificing quality.

We also used humor to decrease stress, create a relaxed working environment and a positive atmosphere for the patients who would sometimes comment; "We love it when the nurses laugh with each other." We were also able to model stress management techniques for them.

Too little control over your work? Empower yourself by increasing your skills

Knowledge is power. We live in the information age where ideas are the new currency. Change is rapid and people who resist change are left behind.

- Be proactive and anticipate change rather than reactive and forced to change.
- Brainstorm with your peers to predict trends
- Learn certain skills that have a high return on your effort :

ACLS certification, IV certification, adult learning theory, CPR instructor certification and communication, leadership and management skills.

Part of our job is to effectively communicate the need for adequate resources. Nurses are experienced interviewers. However, many nurses avoid learning other communication skills like public speaking and writing for publication.

If you become articulate, you wield more influence when making

requests. Take an oral communications course or join a public speaking club like Toastmasters. You will meet people who had been afraid to speak but have learned how to be well spoken. The same is true about writing for publication. A writing course or joining a writers group can enable you to express your views effectively.

According to Stanley Plodzick in the NH Board of Nursing Newsletter, "We have much going for us as a recent survey published in RN January 2000 by L. McAnemy of the Gallup News reported. At 73%, the American Public rated nurses as the most honest and ethical of all the professions. Pharmacists were next at 69%, followed by Veterinarians 63% and Physicians at 48%. Impressive isn't it. Where do we go from here?"

We need to develop the skills to effectively communicate our point of view about healthcare challenges. Just imagine what a difference it would make if more nurses would speak to community groups or write articles. We could change the direction of healthcare because collectively we have so much compassion, knowledge and information.

Also increase your clinical skills by cross training.

- Work in different specialties to broaden your perspective.
- Network both with other nurses and people in other industries.
- Read widely.
- Avoid stagnating and getting in a rut.
- Be a lifelong learner

You become a better nurse by cross training. Med/surg nurses who know psychiatry are more effective with non-compliant or personality disordered patients. Nurses plan better discharges when they understand home care. Ambulatory care nurses with managed care experience can be better negotiators.

Cross training also increases your confidence when working on another unit. Many nurses don't like to "float", but organizations need flexibility due to rapid changes in census and patient acuity. Be prepared when asked to "float". When you are adaptable to many settings, you become a more valuable employee. Be flexible, but know your limitations and be assertive in expressing them. Learn every new skill that you can.

Inadequate peer support? Develop a positive organizational culture.

Think about how nurses treat other staff members. When was the last time you gave another staff member a pat on the back? If we don't support each other, who will? We need to have a positive organizational culture at work

The basic ways to create a positive organizational culture are:

- Be a role model for others. Support effort as well as success. Give encouragement when someone tackles a difficult assignment.
- Collaborate to obtain feedback and improve care. Support other people's projects.
- Increase your own self-respect.

How can we ask for others' respect if we don't even respect ourselves? Our self-image influences how we treat others. When defensive, we perceive situations selectively.

Consider having an attitude of abundance. Sometimes a staff member will undermine another person to accomplish his or her own goals. This is not necessary. Cultivate a win-win attitude. Rather than undermine another person to achieve your goals, support both your co-workers and organization so that everyone can succeed.

Three negative emotions that are obstacles to peer support are anger, fear and jealousy. You lose power when you are angry, fearful or jealous, and thereby waste energy that could be used for constructive purposes. Use effective negotiation techniques instead of resorting to these negative emotions.

Are these strategies realistic? I wondered the same thing before my experience with high performance teams. These strategies work very well. Our high performance team resulted in high occupancy (over 90%) because patients reported excellent care and their practitioners wanted them admitted to our unit. We were able to achieve high quality care and maintain low employee turnover (less than 1%) for over five years. Everyone benefited: the patients, the nurses and the organization.

We desperately need each other's help. Mutual support enables us to function with autonomy, teamwork and meaningful professional relationships. Consider using this approach and increasing your support of your colleagues and co-workers.

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