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By Michelle Martin

RESOURCE CENTER

Fall (Back) in Love With Employees

Here are five tips for engaging employees, with an eye toward retaining the best.

EMPLOYMENT SUPPLY AND demand trends are cyclical, as frustrating as that may be. As employers, we may just be learning how to adjust to periods of a "buyer's market" when we're faced with shortages again. But let's face it—the health care industry almost always experiences significant shortages in key areas, particularly well-qualified coders.

As obvious as it may seem, many of us overlook the importance of retaining the best employees as we put together our staffing plans. Yes, we know the statistics about the cost of replacing an employee, but we often fail to incorporate that knowledge into our everyday management style.

Well, it's time to change these behaviors. Consider what the American Hospital Association's Strategic Policy Planning Committee has said: "This extra large cohort of workers (baby boomers) is followed by the 'baby bust' generation, a relatively small pool of workers ... This is strong evidence that suggests a work force shortage is going to be here for a while and that businesses must take employee retention seriously if they want to meet the challenge of finding workers."

Certainly, hiring the right people is the optimal first step. There's no point in retaining "C" players! But hiring them is only the beginning. Managers must engage their employees and support their personal and professional development if they are going to build a strong team for the long term. And because we're thinking of Valentine's Day coming up soon, let's look at this process as finding new ways to "fall in love (maybe again!) with employees."

FIVE QUICK AND EASY "HOW TO'S"

Here are five tips for engaging employees, with an eye toward retaining the strongest team members:

- *Put out the welcome mat.* A personal welcome call from the HIM director before a new employee starts can set the stage for a positive experience. Then, consider balloons, welcome signs and breakfast to honor new hires on their start dates. Why should parties be limited to going away (and what kind of message does that really send, anyway)?
- *Catch 'em doing something right.* Expect excellence, look for it and recognize it. Remember that standards for excellence must be aligned with the mission, to give employees the sense they are making a valuable contribution. Sharing positive feed-

back in a public setting or through regular recognition meetings builds momentum for improved performance in the entire department.

- *Recognize milestones and accomplishments as much as anniversaries.* There's an old story about the employee who was leaving his employer after 20 years, and one of his colleagues whispered that the employee didn't really have 20 years of experience, but rather 1 year of experience 20 times! The point is that time on the job is important, but accomplishment on the job—such as



a high quality control rating on coded charts—is even more important. In addition, new hires may feel overwhelmed by the concept of being with the organization for 10, 20 or even 30 years. Marking shorter milestones, such as the first 30 days or first year, gives them a goal they can achieve easily.

- *Hold a "What's Stupid Around Here" meeting.* Every employee has suggestions on better ways to do the job, but many are reluctant to voice their opinions. Making it clear that there's no reason to keep doing things a certain way because that's the way they've always been done gives them "permission" to discuss smarter approaches.

- *Survey employees.* High turnover often originates with poor management and a lack of employee engagement. And although there's a lot being written about generational differences, some factors span all generations. Most employees want more than just a job. They also want personal and professional fulfillment, a sense of accomplishment and opportunities for socialization. Asking them their opinions about training and development, job processes, workplace environment and participation in decision making allows them to provide valuable feedback.

In the long run, improving retention rates is much more than just a "touchy-feely" proposition. The real benefits for the department and the organization will be better engaged and happier employees who are motivated to improve operations and profitability. And that's a Valentine any of us would like to receive! ■

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