

Letting the Best Nursing Units Teach the Rest



The greatest challenge facing large health care systems is creating a consistent warm and caring patient experience – one that patients will remember and talk about. The online publication of hospital scores and rankings on patient satisfaction has helped make patient experience a top priority for health care executives, and they now accept the necessity of creating a patient-focused climate within their nursing units.

One solution has been to purchase a vendor program, complete with standard protocols, “scripts” covering every type of patient-staff interaction, workbooks, and of course, videotapes where professional actors demonstrate the “correct” way to interact with patients. Yet, while packaged “patient experience” programs may produce much useful learning, they can also lack sustainability for a variety of reasons:

- They typically cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to deploy across a large multi-hospital system.
- They embody the vendor’s values and not the mission and values of the health care system.
- Actors depicted in vendor training videos are not the best role models. Most caregivers believe, “Our hospital is different! Our patients are special!”

Thus, as with other service quality issues, the answer may not be to shop for a ready-made solution.

The Answer: Look Inside Your Own Hospital System

For the executives leading a hospital system, the ideal, “teachable” role model of excellence for patient experience may be close at hand: a nursing unit within their own organization. Even a moderate-sized health care system will contain scores of nursing units, and a large, multi-hospital system may contain over a hundred such units. The odds are that many of these units are consistently creating an exceptional patient experience. The trick is finding these exceptional units and teaching other units to emulate them.

Selecting Exemplary Nursing Units

An exceptional nursing unit, like an all-star athletic team, is one that does many things well. A great athletic team can run, pass the ball, score points, and complete defensive plays, while avoiding penalties and injuries. By the same token, an exceptional nursing unit is one that also performs well across a “balanced scorecard” of measures: Patient Satisfaction, Employee Commitment/Engagement, Climate-for-Care (nursing practices predictive of Patient Satisfaction), and most important of all, Patient Safety. To select the best nursing units and transfer their practices to other nursing units is a straightforward process that entails the following steps:

1. Compare all nursing units in the hospital system across a balanced scorecard of performance measures (see above), and select the consistent high-scorers. These are Role Model nursing units.
2. Interview unit managers, charge nurses, team leaders, and nursing staff within Role Model nursing units to document their leadership and team practices.
3. In coordination with the corporate nursing department, Chief Nursing officer, system nursing council, or other group responsible for system-wide nurse training, prepare training modules based upon practices of high scorers, including video interviews with Role Model nurses. Develop a deployment plan for this training that includes: piloting, ongoing evaluation, and scale-up of training, as well as periodic updating of training content.
4. Implement the deployment plan, using team leaders and managers from Role Model nursing units as mentors and advisors throughout the process.

A Pulse Survey Tool Can Help

One challenge in selecting Role Model units is collecting a balanced scorecard of measures to compare nursing units. The standard Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) provides measures of Patient Satisfaction, but collecting other critical measures may require aggregating data from many different sources, such as employee surveys, safety surveys, etc.

It is possible, however, to collect all remaining measures) via a short pulse survey, consisting of only about 40 questions. Using a short pulse survey has the advantage of generating comparison measures quickly. Moreover, short pulse surveys can be used as pre- and post-training measures to evaluate the effectiveness of training. The Scalpone Group has developed a 10-minute Nursing Unit Pulse Survey that includes measures of Employee Commitment/ Engagement, Climate-for-Care, and Patient Safety Climate. The Patient Safety Climate indices are derived from the Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality (AHRQ) patient safety survey. These indices consist of both an Overall Safety Risk Index and Safety Climate Index, and have been used successfully in evaluating safety training. For more information on the Nursing Unit Pulse Survey, contact Russ Scalpone, Ph.D. at russ@scalponeinfo.com.