The staff engagement challenge – a factsheet for nursing leaders and managers

As nursing staff are the largest group in the NHS workforce, and are key to delivery of patient care, it is essential for NHS organisations to secure high levels of engagement among this important group. NHS Employers seeks to assist organisations to engage their staff through sharing research on key issues, ideas and resources for improvement. This factsheet looks at the main issues in the engagement of nurses and how this can be improved. If you would like further information about these issues, please email staffengagement@nhsemployers.org

What is staff engagement?
Staff engagement describes what happens when people think and act in a positive way about the work they do, the people they work with and the organisation they work in.

Why nurse engagement is important – patient care
Research has demonstrated a correlation between nurse engagement and patient care. Engaged employees are more productive, have improved health and well-being and lower levels of absence. Engagement is linked to factors such as effective teamwork and good communication, which contribute to a safety culture. High levels of staff disengagement can damage quality.

Patient outcomes and satisfaction
Research by Aston University has identified clear links between high levels of staff engagement, as measured in the NHS staff survey, and good outcomes for patients, as measured by the patient survey. Organisations with higher levels of engagement also had higher levels of reported patient satisfaction and lower levels of standardised patient mortality.

Improving safety and efficiency
Staff engagement has been shown to be a key element in the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement’s Productive Ward programme, an initiative that focuses on improving ward processes and environments to help nurses and therapists spend more time on patient care, thereby improving safety and efficiency. In addition, engaging staff has been identified in the success of attempts to generate efficiency savings.
What nurses are saying

Evidence from the NHS staff survey reveals an interesting paradox. Despite high levels of motivation, commitment to and broad satisfaction with their jobs, particularly in the belief they have supportive managers, nurses are unhappy with communication and levels of involvement, and in particular, do not feel their concerns are either listened to or acted on. Although they take pride in their work and feel they make a difference, overall, nurses do not feel as engaged with the organisations they work for as other groups.

This picture is also found in other countries. In the USA, for example, research consultancy Gallup found that nurses felt they did not receive any recognition and that their opinion was not valued.

Research by King’s College Nursing Unit found that lack of support and the perception of being undervalued were key factors that demotivate staff. The study identified that action was needed on staff health and safety and, in particular, in response to nurses’ concerns.

How to improve nurse engagement

A number of organisations have sought to improve engagement of their nursing staff and have done so in different ways.

Listening to nurses

In Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospital, nurses identified need for changes such as improved facilities and better stock control. As part of the Listening into Action programme, staff helped develop and then implemented ideas for better organisation of ward rounds and use of staff time.

Clinical leadership programme

The Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust has developed an innovative clinical leadership programme which supports leadership development for clinicians, including nurses. It has also been successful in engaging nursing staff in particular around efforts to improve safety, and has contributed to improvements in staff engagement.

Quality improvements

Nottinghamshire University Hospital has an integrated programme to generate efficiency savings and quality improvements. The programme has been successful in engaging nursing staff in making improvements and has contributed to a culture of improvement.

Support for line managers

Organisations such as Royal Bolton NHS Foundation Trust have focussed on improving support for line managers to build effective nursing teams, for example by ensuring there are clear objectives that link nurses’ activities to overall goals and act on nurses’ concerns.

Find out more and get involved

More information about staff engagement can be found on the NHS Employers staff engagement web pages www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement.

We are keen to involve nursing managers and leaders in our staff engagement work. If you would like to join our staff engagement network to receive the latest news and advance notice of our free events and webinars, please email your details to staffengagement@nhsemployers.org. You can also join our discussion group on Linked In, simply search for NHS staff engagement in the groups list.