The idea board: A best practice initiative

By Maureen Kroning, EdD, RN; Phyllis Yezzo, DNP, RN; Mary Leahy, MD; and Anne Foran, MSN, RN, PCCN

Healthcare faces enormous challenges that affect both frontline nurses and their patients, including economic constraints, resource allocation, and the pressure to achieve excellent staff and patient satisfaction. When confronted with so many challenges, the management team may overlook the inclusion of frontline nurses in decisions that impact their work. Yet, frontline staff members are well positioned to identify needed unit improvements.

According to the American Nurses Association (ANA), nurses are instrumental in leading the improvements needed in today’s healthcare environment but, before this is possible, they need to be in practice environments that are safe, empowering, and satisfying. One study found that hospitals with high nurse engagement had staff members who reported less negative job outcomes. In a 2012 Gallup poll consisting of approximately 1.4 million employees from 192 organizations, 49 industries, and 34 countries, there was a strong connection between engaged employees and performance outcomes such as customer rating, profitability, productivity, turnover, safety incidences, theft, absenteeism, patient safety incidences, and quality deficits. And according to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, “The most joyful, productive, engaged staff feel both physically and psychologically safe, appreciate the meaning and purpose of their work, have some choice and control over their time, experience camaraderie with others at work, and perceive their work life to be fair and equitable.”

Nurse leaders are essential in creating work environments that inspire and motivate frontline staff members to develop best practice initiatives. Cultivating good working relationships with frontline staff begins with listening to what they have to say about unit improvements. One study found that hospitals with high nurse engagement had staff members who reported less negative job outcomes. In a 2012 Gallup poll consisting of approximately 1.4 million employees from 192 organizations, 49 industries, and 34 countries, there was a strong connection between engaged employees and performance outcomes such as customer rating, profitability, productivity, turnover, safety incidences, theft, absenteeism, patient safety incidences, and quality deficits. And according to the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, “The most joyful, productive, engaged staff feel both physically and psychologically safe, appreciate the meaning and purpose of their work, have some choice and control over their time, experience camaraderie with others at work, and perceive their work life to be fair and equitable.”

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The idea board is located in the unit’s nursing lounge so the nurses can view the ideas during break time, which promotes collaboration. It also allows staff members to see that the manager recognizes and values their input. The board consists of multiple sections: the idea, just do it, in progress, possible, challenges, and kibosh it. The board is intended for both RNs and unlicensed assistive personnel (UAP) to post their ideas for unit improvements. First, the staff member writes the idea on a sticky note and places it in the idea column on the board. The nurse manager then reviews the idea, which may require consulting with the staff member for clarification. Next, the sticky note is moved to the appropriate column as the idea progresses to implementation or is kiboshed.

For instance, one idea to purchase a water cooler for the break room was placed in the kibosh column because this wasn’t allowed by the institution. The idea to hang a coat hook in the lounge was put into the just do it column. And an idea to purchase portable telemetry monitors went to the possible column because it needed input and approval from senior leadership.

Ideas such as moving respiratory equipment close to patient rooms, having a central location for personal protective equipment, and purchasing items such as a standing scale and blanket
warmer helped save time from previously having to either walk a longer distance to get the item or borrow the equipment from other hospital units. This improved work efficiency and staff satisfaction. One idea to volunteer as a unit project to donate school supplies to children in need was a huge success, with both managers and staff members verbalizing feeling good about what they accomplished. This showed just how effective the idea board is in encouraging staff collaboration and working together as a team to achieve goals.

Six months after the idea board was implemented, there were approximately 40 ideas posted on the board, 70% of the ideas were implemented, and management noted an increase in staff engagement due to the quality improvements made on the unit. To capture the board’s impact, an anonymous survey was provided to staff members that simply asked what they found to be positive about the idea board and what they didn’t like about it. Twenty nurses and five UAP completed the survey and then participated in an informal discussion with the nurse manager about what they liked or didn’t like about the idea board. Positive effects noted included staff ownership of and recognition for ideas, enhanced team building and collaboration, increased engagement, and improved unit processes. All 25 participants verbalized positive comments; only two negative comments were made. (See Sample comments.) Because most comments were positive, it was decided that the idea board should be implemented on all hospital units. The manager who first introduced the idea board provided direction to the managers of the other hospital units on how to implement the board.

ENGAGE
An ENGAGE mnemonic was created and shared with all of the hospital unit managers to help those utilizing the idea board reap the benefits of frontline nurse engagement:

- Empowerment
- Nursing support
- Gap identification
- Accountability for change
- Goals
- Excellence in performance.

**Empowerment.** Frontline staff members can positively impact both staff and patient satisfaction and patient outcomes. Nurse leaders can empower frontline nurses to see their contributions as being important to the unit’s improvement processes. A vital nurse leader role is creating empowered teams, which, in turn, can impact morale, productivity, retention, and the quality and safety of care.5

**Nursing support.** Support from nursing leadership is crucial to empower frontline nursing staff. Nurses feel that their managers should promote unity and team spirit, be visible and approachable, and have regular contact with them to listen to their opinions.6 Frontline nurses also appreciate leaders who form collegial relationships with staff.7

**Gap identification.** It’s necessary to identify and address gaps in nursing practice. Nurse leaders are often aware of these gaps and must be able to communicate them to frontline staff. For instance, organizational pressure to increase productivity places the focus of nursing on cost-effectiveness and external accountability, which may leave nurses feeling like they don’t have the autonomy to influence quality of care and patient satisfaction issues.6

**Accountability.** Nurse leaders need to ensure that all employees are held accountable for their actions and role in adhering to practice guidelines and professional standards. Each person working in healthcare is held accountable as a staff member, as a member of a team, and as an employee of the organization. Staff members are accountable for speaking up and advocating for needed improvements. Organizations that have a culture of

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**Sample comments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive staff comments</th>
<th>Negative staff comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I can put an idea down anonymously and not feel threatened if someone doesn’t agree with my idea.</td>
<td>• Some equipment requests take a long time since they have to go through a capital budget request.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We have input in what we do.</td>
<td>• Some classes that have been requested were out of the hands of the manager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We can see what we’ve accomplished.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The idea is acknowledged, and we can follow where we are with the implementation of our idea.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Everyone feels free to give ideas and it’s nice to see that we’re getting things done on the unit.</td>
<td></td>
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TEAM CONCEPTS

accountability foster employees who are credible to both themselves and each other.9

Goals. The World Health Organization, The Joint Commission, the National League for Nursing, and the ANA are among a sample of organizations with the goal of ensuring competent, safe, and quality care for patients, families, and communities. The Joint Commission’s National Patient Safety Goals are intended to improve patient safety by both identifying healthcare problems and finding solutions to them.9 Nurse leaders must ensure that frontline staff members have the resources they need to provide safe, competent care to all.

Excellence. The Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (hcahps) survey measures patients’ perceptions of the care they received while at the hospital.10 It’s the goal of nursing staff on each unit to receive excellent patient satisfaction scores on the hcahps survey. Managers play an instrumental role in disseminating survey results to frontline nurses and making changes to improve scores.

Raising our voices

Frontline nursing staff members have enormous potential to lead substantial quality improvement efforts. The idea board empowers staff members and recognizes their contributions, thus creating a positive work environment. Through the implementation of best practice initiatives, nurse leaders can help engage our most precious resource—frontline staff—and address the many challenges they face. The idea board gives employees a voice and shows them that the management team is listening, with the ultimate benefit of improving nursing practice and transforming patient care. NM

REFERENCES


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