

# Promoting Work Engagement: *One Medical Center's Journey*

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**T**he ability to effectively engage employees is now recognized as an important business differentiator.<sup>1</sup> In health care, it has been shown to impact quality of care, patient satisfaction, and safety.<sup>2-5</sup> Yet, employee engagement and loyalty can be challenging in our current turbulent health care environment when the focus for most organizations has been on reducing costs, improving quality, and implementing innovative change. Recent nationwide research conducted by the Advisory Board Company indicates that only 32.8% of registered nurses (RNs)

are engaged in their work, and 7.4% are actively disengaged.<sup>6</sup> Statistically, professional nurses have lower work engagement and higher disengagement rates than other frontline staff in health care agencies. This is troubling because nurses contribute substantially to the patient care experience and are also crucial in efforts to transform health care. The 2010 Institute of Medicine Report on *The Future of Nursing* recommended that nurses should be prepared to lead change to address the gaps in health.<sup>7</sup> This will not happen if nurses are disengaged in their jobs.

This article outlines the journey of 1 mid-size, community hospital to build and sustain employee work engagement. The leadership perspective presented here is unique because the chief nursing officer (CNO) has been in her role for 20 years and has watched the challenges that each new decade brings. The health care environment has changed drastically during the past 2 decades. Some of the best practices worked historically to engage employees in a more straightforward, operating environment are less effective today.<sup>8</sup>

Having stable senior nursing leadership has enabled this organization to evaluate and transform the way business is done to promote more effective staff engagement and focus on transformative rather than incremental change. The lessons learned about employee engagement may be useful to other organizations in their strategic planning around this challenging area in leadership today.

## THE MYSTERY OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

There is a lack of consensus in the literature about the definition of work engagement and how to best measure it. Conceptually, it has been linked to empowerment, job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment.<sup>9</sup> Staff engaged in their work have been noted to exhibit passion, commitment, and a willingness to invest in themselves to help their organizations succeed.<sup>10</sup> Work engagement has been found to be higher among nurses working for nurse managers who practice authentic leadership and are themselves engaged in their work.<sup>11</sup>

Workload, level of organizational change, decision latitude, and career development opportunities have also been found to have impact on levels of engagement along with the level of job stress.<sup>5</sup> Nurses with more experience have been found in some studies to be more engaged than younger staff.<sup>12</sup> There is evidence to support that Magnet<sup>®</sup>-designated health care agencies have higher levels of staff engagement, which is often attributed to the strong focus on a healthy work environment and shared governance in decision making.<sup>4,13</sup>

Five key leadership strategies recommended by the experts to promote engagement include the following<sup>6,8,12</sup>:

1. **Promote identification with the organization:** help each staff member to see how the mission and values of the organization are consistent with his or her personal values.
2. **Connect staff to the success/status of the organization:** encourage staff to develop a sense of pride in an organization by showing how their contributions matter in the organization's accomplishments and status.
3. **Create security:** give staff a sense of security about their employability and potential career paths within the organization.
4. **Provide recognition and opportunities to build skills:** validate the skills and worth of staff and promote camaraderie and teamwork.
5. **Build trust:** build an environment of trust and transparency. Demonstrate that as a leader, you trust your staff and can personally be trusted.

Even with the use of these strategies, as leaders at St. Lucie Medical Center (SLMC) learned, the quest to improve employee engagement is ongoing. What works to engage employees needs to be revised over time. The healthcare environment has become one of constant change, and employees' needs change as new generational cohorts with different attitudes, values, and beliefs join the workforce.

## THE JOURNEY AT ST. LUCIE MEDICAL CENTER

The journey to promote stronger employee engagement began in 2000 when SLMC leadership met with consultants from the Gallup Organization to discuss the organization's then low employee engagement scores. After brainstorming what needed to happen first, the decision was made to ground the organization in a strong VISION statement to promote employee identification with the organization. A conceptual image of the VISION statement (*Figure 1*) was collaboratively developed and shared with the entire organization within 3 months. Employee engagement was included as a corner stone of the new VISION statement. Today, nothing significant is done at SLMC unless it ties back to the vision of fostering employee engagement, promoting customer loyalty, and providing quality, cost-effective care. The leadership team continues to believe that engaged employees is the most important tenant of the VISION and drives the other 2 outcomes. Placed at the top of the pyramid (*Figure 1*), the 850 employees are critical to the success of the hospital.

Four key strategies were developed to foster employee engagement. Valuing the employee's voice was identified as the first key strategy. Employee opinions about the organization are assessed through an anonymous annual employee survey. The most important part of this process is not the survey itself, but the staff discussion of the results. Meetings with all nursing staff to discuss annual survey findings have been facilitated by the CNO for the last 15 years. This intentional communication about survey findings has proved to be a critical success factor to engage nursing staff. The other 3 strategies included hiring for talent, achieving cultural competence, and giving out recognition/rewards.

We began to see results within 1 year. In 2001, St. Lucie Medical Center ranked highest among all organizations in the world as surveyed by Gallup on the Employee Engagement Survey.<sup>14</sup> Although this was a remarkable accomplishment, there was a second award that was even more important to all of the nurses in the hospital. That same year, the Healthcare Advisory Board in Washington, DC, selected SLMC as 1 of 5 Destination Nursing Hospitals in the United States. The Healthcare Advisory Board spent 5 days at the hospital validating its decision process. It was a proud day for nurses at all levels at the hospital.

Even though we attained these high honors, we found employee engagement is difficult to sustain over time. Leaders and directors turn over as well as staff. Other pressing initiatives become priorities, and without intentional efforts, our attention is easily diverted from a focus on employee engagement. Fast forward to 2007, the nursing professional practice council selected Boykin and Schoenhofer's<sup>15,16</sup> Nursing as

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