



Back to the Basics: 5 (Pain-Free) Steps to Staff Retention, Engagement

Nursing homes and a focus on caring for our elderly have been around for a long time, said Julie Stafford, RN, CDP, CDONA, CADDCT, IP-BC, treasurer of NADONA; and turnover has been an ongoing challenge as well. But Stafford noted that there are some steps DONs and other team leaders can take to create a culture of teamwork and a common focus on quality care:

1. Look at how you handle paperwork and documentation. “Staff have to document everything they do, but you need to train them about how to provide accurate and efficient documentation,” Stafford said. It is important to be realistic, she noted, and give nurses time to complete the necessary documentation.

At the same time, don’t just provide a couple of hours of training and expect them to know what to do. She stressed that while training can cost time and money, the return on investment can be significant. For instance, if a resident refuses to be bathed, this needs to be put in the record. If the family complains that mom didn’t get a bath, the CNA or other team member won’t be unfairly blamed, and the family can be engaged in helping to overcome mom’s resistance.

2. Share information and updates in a timely manner. For instance, Stafford said, “We have a director of reimbursement who stays on top of regulatory and reimbursement issues and news, and she has weekly calls with the MDS team and with leadership to share information.” Leaders then determine what to filter to staff and these communications go out to everyone at the same time every week. “This can help prevent the DON and other team leaders from spending time putting out fires,” Stafford said, and it prevents gaps in communication and the spread of misinformation.

3. Give people a chance to be heard. “You can offer all the bonuses in the world, but people won’t stay if you don’t treat them with respect and give them a say and an opportunity to share ideas and concerns,” Stafford said. She stressed that when there is a breakdown in communication, it’s “on us, not employees.” She said, “You have to be positive with staff. When we roll something out – such as a regulatory change – I try to give them the ‘why.’” She also noted, “I will tell my teams that if they have ideas about how to make something work or how to implement a change, they should let me know. You might be surprised about the really good ideas you’ll get.”

4. Stick to your processes. Stafford said, “Have a system you know will work and stick to it, as challenging as that may be sometimes.” She added, “Surround yourself with smart people, and build a strong team you trust to care for residents.” Elsewhere, the DON and administrator need to be on the same page, she said. “The team will follow when they see that you are collaborating and working in harmony.” She concluded, “It may take a while to get to that place, but do it and it will work.”

5. Do the right thing. “If you focus on caring for residents and doing the right thing, people see that and it helps to unite them and create an engaged, cohesive team,” Stafford said.