Nurse Manager Perceptions of Work Overload and Strategies to Address It

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The role of the nurse in the hospital setting has evolved to meet the ever-increasing acuity and complexity of patients. Likewise, the role of the nurse manager has expanded to meet the needs of the staff and patients on the nursing units, and is considered by some to be the most demanding role in health care. In addition to responsibility for the financial outcomes of the unit, nurse managers are also accountable for the experience of the patient, which includes both clinical and satisfaction outcomes, as well as for providing a safe, engaging, positive work environment for the staff in the area. Nurse managers are also expected to foster relationships with leaders of the various interdisciplinary teams throughout the hospital, as well as to promote physician engagement and partnership with nursing. Expanded role responsibilities along with broader spans of control contribute to increased job demands as well as work stress. Additionally, nurse managers often do not have adequate authority to make decisions affecting the operations in their areas, which can undermine their authority, leading to dissatisfaction with the work. The increased stress and workload can lead to disengagement, burnout, and ultimately, to nurse manager turnover.

As the knowledge of quality nurse practice environments increases, a consistent finding is the importance of the nurse manager in fostering that environment. A study by Warshawsky and Rayens led to the development of the Nurse Manager Practice Environment Scale, consisting of 44 items affecting nurse manager job performance in 8 domains. Creating cultures that generate creativity, foster relationships between hospital leaders and physicians, promote patient safety, as well providing adequate staffing and supply resources are critical to the success of nurse managers. The Nurse Manager Practice Environment Scale has subsequently been used to identify organizational characteristics that influence the satisfaction of nurse managers, as well as their intent to leave. Tools such as this can be used by senior hospital leaders to assess nurse manager burnout while at the same time develop strategies to help reduce it.
CAUSES OF NURSE MANAGER BURNOUT

Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, experienced by otherwise psychologically healthy individuals in response to chronic job stressors. There are multiple factors that can lead to work overload and burnout.

Span of Control

Span of control, or the number of direct reports a manager has, varies widely throughout the industry, as well as within each individual organization. Regardless of the span of control, nurse managers are all held accountable for achieving organizational goals. Many organizations have chosen to operate with fewer nurse managers to decrease labor costs; however, larger nurse manager spans of control contribute to a higher rate of adverse patient events, as well as to less job satisfaction and greater turnover rates. A recent study of turnover involving 291 nurse managers found that managers intending to stay in their jobs supervised fewer staff than those intending to leave, and also reported higher job satisfaction as well as satisfaction with the amount of interaction with their staff. Although there is no evidence-based recommendation for an appropriate span of control, the literature suggests that higher spans of control have negative consequences for the organization, including increased turnover rates among staff, as well as on patient outcomes.

Role Conflict

From the moment of being hired for their first leadership position, nurse managers are placed in a conflicted role. The practice of hiring the most experienced and highest performing clinicians into the role of nurse manager often results in confusion, personal conflict, and ineffective leadership, which may ultimately lead to decreased quality of care and poor outcomes. This lack of clarity in the role stems from a blurring of the boundaries between nurse managers and clinical nurses providing direct patient care. Often times, nurses on the units are confused or unclear about the role of the nurse manager, further adding to the overall role confusion.

Nurse managers are often placed in the position of managing conflicting demands as well as competing interests. Often times, the decisions that nurse managers make are perceived as favorable by one group while being unfavorable to another, putting the nurse manager into the position of arbiter of social reality. Other contradictory objectives occur at the operational level, including increasing productivity and quality while decreasing the budget. This continuous conflict from multiple directions and stakeholders adds to the manager’s stress and workload, increasing the likelihood of burnout.

Scope Creep

As the economics of health care have changed, hospitals have had to reassess and realign staffing models, including those of nurse managers. In an attempt to control costs, many organizations have increased the number of departments and/or staff for which each nurse manager is responsible. As departments and units are realigned, the scope of the nurse manager’s role has widened, meaning that roles once traditionally outside of the nursing realm have become part of the work of the nurse manager. Additionally, as other disciplines are forced to realign their work, nurse managers often must step in to see that vital components of patient care are completed as they are ultimately responsible for the outcomes on their units.

STEPS TO REDUCE THE WORKLOAD

Senior hospital leaders, in partnership with nurse managers, should consider ways to address nurse manager workload. Nurse manager satisfaction and retention are vital for the success of the organization. Addressing concerns will increase nurse manager engagement, ultimately leading to increased staff engagement and better patient outcomes.

Make the Work Meaningful

Many nurses, including nurse managers, are driven by having a role that provides purpose, has meaning, and makes a difference. Managers can often get caught in the monotony of the daily functions of the job, decreasing the amount of time for staff-development, as well as self-development. By providing opportunities for nurse managers to develop their own practice, as well as opportunities to add variety to their work, senior hospital leaders can help assure that nurse manager workloads are appropriate, and that the likelihood of burnout is decreased.

Structures and practices that support nurse managers must also be present in the organization. One study of nurses and their perception of manager support suggested that having these structures in place gives managers the opportunity to engage in the necessary and preferred work of helping staff to succeed. These structures and processes include the availability and approachability of directors and chief nurse executives, a strong, consistent hospital culture, peer support from other managers, training sessions and seminars, including the “soft” aspects of leadership, office space on the unit, and administrative assistant support. Implementing a leadership development program based upon the principles of transformational leadership can help prevent role stress and perceived role overload while also improving patient safety outcomes.

Address the Appropriateness and Breadth of the Work

The work that nurse managers do on a daily basis often falls outside the normal scope of their role. Maintenance, housekeeping, food service, and lab concerns are just a few examples of areas that nurse managers have to address outside of their normal job duties. Additionally, some of the work built into the manager role, such as the scheduling of staff and the processing of payroll, adds to the workload of the manager even though it is not specifically a nursing function. Some hospitals have taken the step of incorporating administrative assistants into the nursing division, which helps to offload some of the clerical work for which nurse managers are often responsible.

Senior hospital leadership can help to manage this extraneous work by working together to ensure that all departments are doing the appropriate work with the appropriate
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