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SAFETY MATTERS Newsletter

Presented By:
Thomas
McGee, L.C.

Leadership: Communication Between Directors of Nursing and Staff

By: Stephen Frew and Beverly Figge, Loss Control Consultants, Thomas McGee- A Division of Risk-Strategies

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of effective communication in nursing homes has never been clearer. Directors of Nursing (DONs) often found themselves inundated with new protocols, staffing challenges, and evolving guidelines, while frontline caregivers managed the physical and emotional toll of a global health crisis. Amid these pressures, communication gaps frequently arose, leading to misunderstandings, low morale, and potential risks to resident care.

By implementing regular forums for dialogue, accessible leadership practices, and clear digital communication tools, nursing home management can bridge the post-COVID leadership gap, create a supportive environment for employees, and deliver higher-quality care for residents.

Establishing Structured, Consistent Meetings

One of the most effective ways to ensure clarity and reduce rumors is through regular, organized team meetings that convey solid information without wasting valuable time.

One successful approach is **weekly Team Huddles.** These short, stand-up meetings (10–15 minutes) provide brief yet frequent updates on census changes, resident conditions, staff scheduling, and ongoing infection control measures. They foster real-time collaboration, prevent information silos, and keep everyone aligned on critical changes.

The weekly huddles can be paired with monthly Roundtable Discussions where representatives from various shifts and departments can join discussions about policy changes, quality improvement initiatives, and staff feedback. These meetings create an inclusive space for staff to voice ideas and foster transparency in decision-making.

By maintaining a predictable structure, management signals that communication is prioritized. Consistency alleviates anxiety, as employees know exactly when and where they can raise concerns or receive the latest information.

Embracing an Open-Door Policy

While scheduled meetings are vital, informal interaction is equally important in building trust. An effective DON should designate specific time frames each week where staff can drop in without an appointment. This practice breaks down hierarchies and allows nurses and CNAs to ask questions or discuss challenges freely.

Conduct Walk Arounds

Regular visits to different units help the DON observe workflow and resident care firsthand while opening opportunities for casual conversations. Staff are more likely to discuss issues in their "home" environment, where they feel comfortable and can illustrate problems in real time.

This approach to accessible leadership fosters a sense of unity and allows the DON to proactively catch morale issues, potential conflicts, or resident care risks before they escalate.

Leveraging Digital Communication Tools

In modern healthcare settings—especially in fast-paced post-pandemic climates—digital tools can streamline communication and reduce misunderstandings.

HIPAA-compliant apps offer real-time messaging among staff, making them ideal for updates on resident statuses, bed availability, or urgent supply needs. Instead of paper memos, use an intranet or shared online workspace to post shift schedules, policy updates, and staff achievements. Automated notifications help ensure that important messages are not overlooked.

While these solutions improve efficiency, balancing digital communication with human interaction is essential. Quick texts can address urgent matters, but face-to-face or phone conversations remain best for complex discussions, counseling, or conflict resolution.

Collaborative Decision-Making and Transparency

When staff feel included in shaping policies, compliance and morale naturally rise. Strategies include:

- *Staff Advisory Committees:* Comprising a cross-section of employees, these committees regularly meet with the DON to review upcoming initiatives and provide feedback based on frontline experiences.

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- *Feedback Loops with Action Plans*: Gathering suggestions via surveys or "suggestion boxes" ensures staff voices are heard. Committing to reviewing these ideas, implementing feasible changes, and communicating results back to staff demonstrates responsiveness and encourages continued engagement.
- *Policy Preview Sessions*: Before rolling out significant changes, informational sessions explaining the "why" behind decisions help build trust and reduce resistance, as staff understand the rationale and consequences of each adjustment.

Communication Does Not Happen by Accident

Building a communication-driven culture in nursing homes requires intentional effort, combining structured meetings, open-door leadership, and transparent decision-making. In a post-COVID reality, where staff burnout remains a real threat and new challenges continue to emerge, proactive and empathetic communication strategies are paramount.

By implementing regular team huddles, accessible leadership hours, digital tools, and collaborative committees, Directors of Nursing can bridge existing gaps and foster a more resilient, engaged staff. This, in turn, elevates the quality of resident care and positions the facility to manage future hurdles with agility and confidence. Through a concerted focus on empathy, consistency, and transparency, nursing home leaders can rebuild—and sustain—a supportive, high-performing environment where every voice matters.