Nurse Engagement: A Diversity and Inclusion Imperative

As an example, active listening may look something like this: A nurse leader engages nurses in a diversity, equity, and inclusion listening session in which staff nurses of color freely and openly discuss their experiences with microaggressions, including being ignored by senior staff (such as managers or social workers) or feeling marginalized based on their racially motivated reasons. Staff nurses might also take the time to recount patients’ uses of racially inappropriate terms and management’s dismissal of the offense and/or their failure to investigate the claims. Taking a moment to reflect, the nurse leader listening to such accounts acknowledge both the nurses’ perspectives and her own discomfort with the topic, but vow to investigate and learn the best approach to these instances. Diane Holiday (2021) can ultimately decide to work with other leaders and nurses to address racial and ethnic microaggressions and develop a program to prevent reoccurrences.

Another example of active engagement is to create a diversity committee that is representative of staff nurses and gives them a venue to discuss their thoughts and make space for leader empathy. Allowing staff nurses to express their perceptions and perspectives can lead to the development of creative pathways for ensuring a more diverse nursing workforce. Nurse leaders must allow these discussions to be active and allow nurses to discuss their thoughts on nurse diversity both truthfully and comprehensively. In turn, leaders must empathize with nurses concerning their feelings toward nurse diversity.

Key Takeaways for Fostering Nurse Engagement

To engage nurses, nurse leaders must work to emotionally connect the constructs of diversity, equity, and inclusion with nurses. Nurse leaders must also make clear to current staff that they are a welcome part of significant changes. Nurse leaders must also work to promote trust among diverse coworkers.

For instance, they should practice the telling and selling phases of situational leadership, including explicitly stating (telling) why diversity and inclusion are important and explaining significant efforts to retain racial and ethnic minority nurses are also necessary. There are hospital systems that, despite the limited pool, have been able to attract, recruit, and retain a diverse pipeline than their counterparts (AHA, 2004). One key platform used by nurse leadership within VUMC is to engage current nurse staffing in its initiative. The VUMC entity-wide interprofessional Racial Equity Taskforce was created in July 2020 to deliver recommendations that would help dismantle historic injustices and structural racism. It was co-lead by a nurse and included staff nurses among the committee members. Since its inception, the task force has delivered recommendations around eight themes that are aimed at, among other elements, recruiting, retaining, and promoting a more diverse workforce.

The work to encourage racial and ethnic minority nurses into the profession will only occur when existing nurses are engaged in similar nurse diversity initiatives. Below is further discussion of how nurses, nurse administrators, and healthcare leadership can use workforce improvement to engage the numbers of racial and ethnic minority nurses within US healthcare.

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Engaged Nurses: Engaged nurses participate on organizational committees with power to influence institutional policies and decisions that affect the practice environment. Engaged nurses are also committed to their profession and what is supported as best practices. Their commitments are demonstrated in the following areas:

1. commitment to the hospital/healthcare organization where they practice.
2. commitment to social change which improves their community’s health.
3. Advocacy for health equity.
4. Advocacy for the inclusion of diverse staff.

Indeed, improving nurse engagement is a system-level approach that addresses numerous workforce issues, including diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I). As such, nurse leaders must ensure that engaged nurses have an opportunity to participate in diversity and inclusion initiatives at all levels of their respective organizations. The development of a nursing workforce that reflects the diversity of its patients can only be achieved by understanding nurses’ desires to fully engage their work practices.

How to Engage Nurses: Active listening is an effective way for nurse leaders to increase nurses’ involvement with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Leaders demonstrate their commitment through the following actions:

1. Outline the nurse leader’s, and the organization’s commitment to nurse workforce diversity, equity, and inclusion.
2. Role model diversity, equity, and inclusion best practices.
3. Clearly articulate the DE&I environment keys such as job satisfaction, burnout, and retention (Cho, 2006; Dempsey et al., 2016). Dempsey et al. (2016) found that nurses who are engaged are more likely to have favorable job outcomes compared to those who are not engaged.

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