



Bridging the Gap Between Organizational Policies and Practice

by

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It may come as a surprise to many nurses that all healthcare organizations have formal policies that address poor behavior, attitudes, or conflict within their workforce. The policies often speak in general terms concerning the intolerance of untoward behaviors that an organization deems unsupportive of their mission.

Despite the presence of these common human resource policies, unhealthy and unresolved conflict continues to flourish within healthcare organizations. To help understand more about the gap between policy and reality and the impact of conflict resolution, the Center for American Nurses spoke to Donna Yurdin, MA, SPHR

As the President of Credo Management Consulting, Donna Yurdin has more than twenty-five years experience in the human resource management and organizational development fields. As the former head of the Organizational Effectiveness Department for the healthcare system, HCA, Ms. Yurdin was instrumental in developing a workforce development strategy to identify tools and resources for leaders to define and execute learning strategy and accountability systems.

Center: Why do organizations have human resource policies and what are they trying to accomplish?

Ms. Yurdin: Aside from some regulatory and legal requirements that dictate the existence of some policies, organizations have come to rely on policies for organizational attributes that may or may not actually exist. Organizations adopt policies in order to provide structure, predictability, fairness, legal process, ethical standards, formulaic behavior modification, and a teaching tool for new managers/supervisors. Generally, they are a well intentioned communication of expectations for all employees and contractors. Sometimes they become outdated and irrelevant, applied because that is how it was always done. Organizations must be constantly assessing policies for their relevance to customer value, employee safety, etc.

The Center for American Nurses is a professional association whose mission is to create healthy work environments through advocacy, education, and research.

Center: What are expectations of managers in utilizing and applying policies?

Ms. Yurdin: Managers are expected to stick to what the policy says; unfortunately policies cannot predict the nuances of human behavior and therefore, no policy can predict events absolutely and prescribe solutions perfectly. This breakdown between prediction and prescription is the sand trap for managers in applying policies without thinking through the intent of the policy and how the situation at hand may fit. The consequences of blindly applying policies can be the basis for conflict. It is ultimately a breakdown in communication. Communication between people is never perfect and policies are written by people, well intentioned but imperfect.

We human beings assume a lot in our conveyance of messages. We assume everyone is coming from the same point of view and has the same intentions or goals. Our expectations are that everyone thinks the same way we do. They don't!!

Center: How can a policy prevent conflict?

Ms. Yurdin: I don't believe a policy alone can prevent conflict. Nothing can ever take the place of honest, open, communication....and that includes honest, open, listening. Reliance on a policy with absolute certainty will likely be the basis for intransigence in behaviors on all sides of the question. Policies should be the handrails not the handcuffs for human conversation. A policy put in place for the sake of safety to employees or customers may be misunderstood or not communicated to an employee who inadvertently wanders outside the bounds of the policy. Given proper information, training, and understanding, the employee and manager can agree on a new behavior within the bounds of the policy with no conflict. Conflict can most often be avoided through how the policy is communicated and applied.

Center: When the policy doesn't fit the circumstances, what should I do?

Ms. Yurdin: Seek expert advice. Talk to the person or persons who are most expert about the intention of the policy and describe the situation. Talk about the impact of the policy on the individual, the team and the precedent it is setting for similar future situations. The policy may have been written without thought to this circumstance and may need to be adjusted with this situation in mind. Don't take a policy at face value. Ask. Get input. Seek understanding and seek to be understood.

If the answer you get is that the policy will be strictly enforced, no exceptions, you then have to plan how you will communicate this stance to employees. At least you will have a better understanding of the policy's intent.

Employees can continue to seek redress through the problem solving or grievance procedure. The manager's role is to apply a policy fairly and consistently but to also seek guidance when the policy does not



fully fit the situation.

Center: When there are processes in place for conflict resolution, what stands in the way of staff taking advantage of them?

Ms. Yurdin: Nothing. Nor should there be. The problem solving or grievance procedure is there for a reason. It is not there to second guess the manager. It is, in essence, a way for pressure to be released from the situation. Much like a tea kettle has a place for steam to escape, the grievance process allows the employee to get their view heard and ensures the resolution is considered fairly and not decided by one person who may have a preconceived notion or an axe to grind. Grievance processes are prescribed processes, open to any employee and, if done well, allow all employees equal access to resolution of problems and equal treatment by decision makers.

Center: How are the Joint Commission standards addressing this behavior going to affect healthcare?

Ms. Yurdin: It is true that what gets measured gets done. In January of 2009, the Joint Commission will begin applying the new leadership standards. In fact, the Joint Commission standards are catching up with reality. The effects of the new standards will likely be a greater focus by senior leadership on enforcing the behavioral standards and policies they currently have in place

Center: What can fill the void between having a policy and making it reality?

Ms. Yurdin: Manager preparation is paramount. The ability of a manager to understand the intent of a policy, apply it consistently and fairly, communicate it to all employees and mete out appropriate corrective action is key. Listening to employees when they don't follow a policy and hearing their side will allow you to know if there is honest misunderstanding or intentional disobedience.

A manager should not take a policy at face value but question whether it is still pertinent and necessary for the organization, employees and customers. Leadership is another important component. Leaders who communicate the values upon which the policies are based and act accordingly....leading by example will make a difference in how policies are perceived, followed and questioned.

NOTE: Further information on conflict resolution and the Center's draft policy on Lateral Violence and Bullying in the Workplace can be found at www.centerforamericannurses.org.