

Addressing Leadership, Workforce Management and Team-Building

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Not only is keeping staff engaged and committed to their work the mark of good leadership and supervision, but successful workforce management becomes even more critical during a time of staff shortages and a changing work environment, say leaders of an executive seminar hosted last month by the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services.

The community mental health industry is operating in a “dynamic business environment — one we’ve never seen before,” said Andrew Cleek, Ph.D., chief program officer at the McSilver Institute for Poverty, Policy and Research at New York University, and co-presenter, during the seminar, “Building a Better Workforce: Talent Management Strategies for Recruitment, Retention and Burnout.” “This is an unprecedented time of crisis and change,” he said. Supervisors are transitioning from an in-person model to a remote model, literally overnight, Cleek said.

Cleek pointed to the results of a survey of 126 behavioral health organizations conducted by the Mental Health Association in New York State, which found annual turnover rates statewide were 34%. “About one-third of all positions are turning over in our field on a regular basis,” Cleek said. “That’s an unfathomable number.” Substance use disorder organizations across the state are seeing 18% to 20% turnover rates. Additionally, about one out of every four supervisors are leaving their positions, he said.

At the same time, fewer individuals are entering the profession. “Retaining top talent will be even more important in the years ahead,” said Cleek. Related industries are also competing for behavioral health providers (i.e., schools, hospitals, primary care settings and managed care companies), he said.

Cleek noted that the result of employees leaving is part of a “vicious cycle.” Results include work-load increases for remaining employees; patient care is impacted by workforce stress put on by the remaining employees, he said.

Work Conditions, Motivators

Anthony Salerno, Ph.D., innovation and implementation officer at the McSilver Institute for Poverty, Policy and Research at New York University, pointed to the work of Frederick Herzberg, a behavioral scientist who proposed job factors that result in satisfaction and other job factors that prevent dissatisfaction.

According to Herzberg, working conditions, or “hygiene factors,” consist of salary, supervision, regulations, interpersonal relationships and the work itself. Work motivators include achievement, recognition, responsibility, growth opportunity and advancement. “If you improve hygiene — I’m not sure why he called it hygiene — but not the motivators, then you’re not going to get very far,” Salerno said.

Salerno noted that even with a pay increase, “if the person finds the work tedious and the work responsibilities way below them, then you’re not likely going to increase a person’s sense of commitment to their job.”

Behavioral health professionals care about achievement and competence, recognition and a sense of autonomy — the latter where an employee can say, “I can exercise an independent approach to the work that I do. I’m not overly controlled in an environment,” Salerno said.

Importance of Trust

Leaders and supervisors, especially of large organizations, have to be connected to their immediate team, said Salerno. “If there is no trust, the result is conflict with the people in your environment,” he said. “If trust is not present, people will not engage with one another. No one is having a real conversation,” he said, adding that there is no real harmony created. “To make a good decision, you need a robust exchange of ideas, so people can feel heard.”

Salerno added, “When people don’t weigh in, they don’t buy in. They want their decisions and viewpoints heard and understood.” Attention to their viewpoints can help them become committed to going forward on whatever decision is being made, he said. If views are shut down, employees are going to be less likely to move forward in a productive way, he noted.

Salerno acknowledged that sometimes decisions have to be made quickly. “Oftentimes, consensus is impossible,” he said. “Oftentimes, the leaders end up breaking the tie and may say, ‘We’re going to move in this direction,’” said Salerno. “However, people still want to feel they have input into the process.”

Recruitment Strategies

A supervisor should make sure a prospective employee knows what the job is about and what challenges they’re likely to experience, said Salerno. Pairing new employees with seasoned mentors is also important, he said. “Check in to make sure you know how things are going. You’ve invested a lot of time and energy. Check-ins are important,” Salerno said.

Salerno noted that it’s also key to have resources and supports that enable staff to do their job well. Without those supports, it could impact the sense of achievement and gratification one needs to do the work, he said.

Communication is also an incredibly important strategy, Salerno noted. He said one important question to consider is “Is there something we can offer employees that is unique — that our competitors are not?” It’s important to create new opportunities for career growth and development, he added.