Excerpt from:

*The Art and Science of Telephone Triage: How to Practice Nursing Over the Phone*

It is obvious that telephone triage requires a special commitment and understanding of the practice of nursing over the telephone. Recruitment and retention of the ideal staff are critical to program success. The following example, written by the Manager, Answer Line, St. Louis Children's Hospital and BJC HealthCare, illustrates how the FISH! philosophy has been incorporated into a medium-sized call center with the end result of significant employee satisfaction. Additionally, strategies to hire staff who have a high likelihood of success are described in the following best practice.

**CALL CENTER INNOVATIONS IN REWARD, RECOGNITION, AND SELECTIVE RECRUITMENT**

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It is no surprise that registered nurses compose the largest group of providers in the health care industry. The profession’s nursing shortages throughout the years, however, have had an impact on our ability to deliver safe, effective care. The good news, due to the country’s current economic condition, is that both men and women are currently entering the profession. The not-so-good news is that not only are nurses an aging workforce, but they are also leaving the profession due to job dissatisfaction. The continual simmering of these issues within our profession demands a proactive approach to the management of people on the part of the leader in order to recruit and retain qualified nurses.

Most managers believe employees care most about their pay, when in reality what employees want is to have interesting work and be “in the know.” Employees also want to be valued, listened to, and appreciated for the work they do. For the nurse working in telephone triage, whether in a primary practice or call center setting, there are intrinsic issues that affect the nurse’s ability to perform his or her job. Issues such as handling call after call, the isolation of working in cubicles, ergonomics, visibility of management, and the ability to stay current on department information all have an effect on the morale of the individual nurse and the team as a whole. It is the manager’s responsibility to effectively address these issues in support of their staff.

To deliver safe and effective care to patients, and provide an environment where people want to come to work, it is imperative that as formal leaders, managers create a positive and responsive work environment. Incorporating open communication and fostering effective relationships are paramount in building a culture of employee engagement. Other key components to foster employee engagement and assure successful retention are respect, recognition, education, and career development.

Since 1988, St. Louis Children’s Hospital Answer Line, part of BJC HealthCare and the BJC Call Center, has offered 454-KIDS, a free community service, providing pediatric health and wellness information and assessment of illness symptoms. Over the years, the staff has grown
from 12 to almost 60 experienced, pediatric registered nurses. After Hours, a service that began in 1996, provides triage for over 250 community-based pediatricians in both the St. Louis metropolitan area and outstate Missouri and Illinois, when their offices are closed.

The Answer Line has implemented two innovative approaches for the purposes of talent recruitment, proactive management, and reward and recognition of employees. The FISH! Philosophy, the department’s reward and recognition initiative, has enhanced the culture of the department through its promotion of staff satisfaction and retention. The Chally Group Worldwide assessment, administered during the hiring process, promotes selective recruitment.

The FISH! Philosophy
The Answer Line supports staff professionalism, autonomy, accountability, and partnerships. A collaborative environment exists among the staff nurses, ancillary staff, and our community pediatricians, which enhances the nurse’s ability to safely and effectively identify the caller’s needs and assess the patient. Building on this culture of collaboration, the Answer Line leadership embraced the FISH! philosophy early in 2001. Our intent was to enhance the work environment in an effort to exceed both staff and customer satisfaction.

Developed by John Christensen, the FISH! philosophy is based on the experiences of the fish mongers at the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle, Washington. At the core of the FISH! philosophy are four tenets: be there, make their day, choose your attitude, and play. In the book titled FISH!, the reader is encouraged to “imagine a workplace where everyone chooses to bring energy, passion, and a positive attitude to the job every day. Imagine an environment in which people are truly connected to their work, to their colleagues, and to their customers.”

In the fall of 2001, the FISH! philosophy was introduced as a reward and recognition program at the Answer Line. The four tenets of the FISH! philosophy help one focus every day on how he or she chooses to interact with others. Adapting the concepts of the FISH! philosophy increases personal awareness about chosen attitudes, attentiveness to co-workers and customers, and promotes the concept that it is okay to have fun, or “play,” at work. To guarantee a successful launch, leadership at the Answer Line initially selected high energy staff to develop the department’s implementation of the FISH! philosophy. The implementation team, adorned in fishing gear, introduced the FISH! philosophy video at the monthly staff meeting. After viewing the video, groups of staff gathered in different areas to brainstorm what each tenet would look like when brought to life in the call center. Leadership reviewed the staff’s input that came from the brainstorming activity and implemented many of their ideas swiftly.

It has not been by coincidence that the FISH! philosophy has sustained as our culture over the past 9 years. To make certain we were successful, the following areas of concern were addressed, and should also be addressed by anyone considering implementation. The support of senior leadership is paramount for success. Without high level buy-in and support there is no ability to sustain this change in culture. A department or committee should be established to be sure there is an ongoing plan. The infrastructure of the committee must initially be comprised of positive, high-energy staff in order to maintain the momentum. The FISH! philosophy should belong to the staff. They should believe and feel that they “own” it.
Therefore, the manager must transition in his or her role as formal leader of the group to that of a “sounding board,” assisting them, for example, with policy and financial concerns. Learn and remember which activities were successful and repeat them. Maintain a yearly calendar of successful events to review each year. In our call center, one year during a week in February, each staff member wrote an inspirational word on a small wooden heart. All the hearts were kept in a basket (heart shaped, of course) in the call center hallway. As the employees came in for their shift they picked a word on which to focus for that particular shift. The heart words were so successful that remote nurses would ask a co-worker in the office to select their word for the shift.

Allow front-line staff to give input regarding activities and projects by establishing a vehicle for them to communicate ideas. Beware of the naysayers. They will exist. Keep moving forward and eventually they will come along. FISH! activities do not have to be expensive. FISH! can be a low-budget, no-budget initiative. At the Answer Line, the activities most enjoyed by our staff have low to no cost. Finally, consider contacting Chart House, the documentary company responsible for FISH! They are an excellent resource for just about any need, and have become good friends of our call center.

One of the most meaningful stories illustrating our FISH! Culture occurred several years ago. Employees working off-shift in the call center have no access to food, as our cafeteria is closed during the evenings and weekends. At the time, management made an attempt to provide staff with the opportunity to purchase a box lunch through the cafeteria. Our hospital vice president happened to be attending the staff meeting when this process was under discussion. The conversation was about the high cost we would be charged for the meals by the cafeteria and the potential to not be able to provide box lunches. By the time I returned to my office following the meeting, my voice mail light was on. The message was from our hospital vice president telling me that he’d not only come up with a plan to make this work during his five block walk back to the hospital, but he had already put the plan in place! He had arranged for us to have lunches made daily by the cafeteria at the hospital, rather than in our building. The meals would be sent to the department daily by courier. He even paid for the 3-month pilot out of his budget. The program was eventually unsuccessful, but that is not what our staff remembers. What they do remember was the strong support our vice president demonstrated for them and for their needs.

Over the years, the FISH! philosophy has shaped our culture at the Answer Line. Applicants hear about our FISH! culture during their interview. New hires view the FISH! video during orientation. Fostering the FISH! philosophy is a goal on each and every employee’s annual review. The department’s FISH! committee continues to meet monthly, planning activities, games, and events throughout the year. The committee regularly provides a FISH! presentation at staff meetings, tying customer service to the four tenets of the FISH! philosophy. The Answer Line is proud to hold one of our hospital’s highest employee engagement scores year after year. Over the years we have supported other hospital departments with their implementation of the FISH! philosophy. Lastly, we are valued across our hospital system and our community as best practice for reward and recognition, in large part due to the FISH! philosophy.

Selective Recruitment
More recently, St. Louis Children’s Hospital Answer Line collaborated with the Chally Group Worldwide in the development of an online assessment to evaluate for four characteristics of a successful triage nurse. The entire Answer Line RN staff provided the baseline sample population for the Chally Group Worldwide assessment tool, designed to profile the best candidate for a call center position. In situations when qualifications for final candidates are equal, those final candidates being considered for a position are asked to complete the online character assessment as a last step in the interview process. The assessment is not administered in every hiring situation. The Chally Group Worldwide administers the assessment via email at the manager’s request. Results are sent to the manager approximately 24 hours after the candidate completes the assessment. Answer Line leadership estimates the use of this tool as 30% of the decision to hire new nurses. Both the Chally Group Worldwide assessment and the involvement of staff in the interview process promote selective recruitment of new staff members.

In an effort to hire “the best” candidate, the Answer Line has incorporated several strategic components into the hiring process. Following review of applications, the nurse recruiter conducts a phone screening before forwarding top candidates to the manager for initial screening. The manager’s initial screening allows the opportunity to verify information on the application, and also to evaluate the candidate for voice quality and tone. Once qualified applicants have been identified, the manager arranges a shadowing opportunity in the department. Shadowing allows current staff to interact with applicants and provides the manager with staff impressions. Shadowing also provides the candidate with a deeper understanding of his or her potential role as a triage nurse. Applicants are asked to contact the manager after shadowing to discuss their observations. Qualified candidates who express interest in pursuing a position move on to the first interview with the hospital’s nurse recruiter. At this time a keyboarding test is administered to assess proficiency. Upon successful completion of the interview and keyboarding test, the applicant has a second interview with the department’s assistant nurse managers. The final interview is with the department manager. If necessary, final qualified candidates are asked to complete the Chally Group Worldwide online assessment as a last step in the interview process.

Once a new employee joins the Answer Line, preceptors provide their unit training, which involves the use of the clinical guidelines, partnership with physicians, and an introduction to our FISH! philosophy culture. Leaders in the department are fair, consistent, accessible, and speak the golden rule, that is, “success breeds success!” By treating each staff member as a unique individual, the Answer Line values a turnover rate of less than 10%, and we often have alumni return.

Since the implementation of the FISH! philosophy and the Chally Group Worldwide assessment, both customer and physician satisfaction scores at St. Louis Children’s Hospital Answer Line have improved. In addition, as previously stated, annual employee engagement scores reveal that our nurses feel very positive about their workplace and work-life balance. Our sustained employee engagement scores, high retention rates, and longevity of staff are evidence of an environment rich with innovative approaches in maintaining and improving nurse satisfaction.

AIDET
In 2011, as part of the department’s Six Sigma project to establish a standard call flow process, all staff were oriented to AIDETsm, a Studer Group product. AIDET provided us with a measurable tool to build patient and family trust and rapport. When the training materials were evaluated by our Six Sigma team, the concept “just made good sense.”

AIDET is an acronym for acknowledge, introduce, duration, explanation, and thank you. Each of these elements is incorporated into the conversation with the caller/patient, in an effort to decrease anxiety and better serve his or her needs.

Designing our own training vignettes, the call center implemented AIDET into the call flow process in March 2011. Along with the other components of call flow, AIDET is currently being measured through a new audio audit tool.

While we do not yet have measurable results from our audio audits, anecdotal feedback has been impressive. Approximately 2 weeks after implementation, an employee working for a different service in the call center who was unaware of our implementation, mentioned that she was hearing “something different.” Over the cubicle walls, and only able to listen to one side of the conversation, she could strongly sense a “different” conversation with our callers, one that was calmer and more collaborative. A second anecdotal story came from the individual who works on our caller satisfaction survey, again, unaware of the AIDET initiative. During her conversations with callers she mentioned that she was receiving feedback telling her something was positively “different” about the caller’s perception of the call, as well.

Any change is challenging. AIDET, because it is a relationship building tool that “made sense,” has been a relatively easy implementation for us all. We have since shared our success with Process Improvement leaders in our institution, hoping other departments will evaluate it for their patient relationship needs.

References