



From Onboarding to Engaged in 5 Steps

In a recent survey, the majority of long-term care DONs said that staffing challenges will stay the same or get worse in the coming year. To help retain staff, effective onboarding is key – and DONs need tools and resources to ensure new staff are onboarded in a way that engages them and makes them feel valued from day one.

Sherrie Dornberger, Executive Director of NADONA LTC, the National Association of Directors of Nursing Administration in Long Term Care, identified these 5 keys for successful onboarding and engagement:

> 1. Build a Good Team

Yes, this can be challenging, but it is essential to ensuring consistently effective onboarding. Dornberger says, “This means everyone is working on recruiting and training.” Additionally, she offers, “You need your team to create a positive atmosphere for new people or you will have a revolving door.”

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She suggests working with a clinical ladder program where you coach and pay people to work with and train new staff so each new person gets a similar positive experience.

> 2. Focus on the First Two Days

“The first two days are most important. Make new staff feel included. Introduce them to everyone from the administrator to the maintenance crew. Make sure they get invited to lunch and on breaks,” says Dornberger.

She adds, “I take new employees on rounds with me and introduce them to the residents. I have pens, pins, and other things and I make them a little goodie bag. This doesn’t have to be expensive – just something thoughtful to make them feel welcome and appreciated.”

> 3. Give New Employees an Opportunity to Evaluate Their Onboarding Experience and Their Trainer(s)

“We give new employees an evaluation to complete so they can critique the training, what they learned, etc.,” says Dornberger, adding, “We have taken people off training because they were wonderful team members and good at their jobs but didn’t know how to train others.”

When staffing is short and people are tight on time, be creative about training, Dornberger suggests; for example, consider bringing in nursing students to help.

> 4. Don’t Underestimate the Value of the Little Things

Individually, these may not make or break retention; but in connection with a healthy culture, effective onboarding/training and a welcoming environment, these can make a real difference. Dornberger says, “Some people use things like a free coffee or treat cart that sits outside the DON’s office.”

She also suggests that old med carts can be converted to snack carts with chips, granola bars, sports drinks, and other items. Facilities also can consider the benefits of offering free meals. Dornberger says, “One facility has murals on the walls with buckets of pens. Staff can take a few minutes and color by themselves or with a resident. It can be very calming, and this can make a real difference.”

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> 5. Put Yourself in the Shoes of New Employees

“Just showing them a video or sitting them at a computer for online training only goes so far. It will be much more meaningful for them to meet the administration, the chaplain, board members and others who can share your mission,” Dornberger says.

She adds, “Have them talk to family members or sit in on a family council meeting. Talk to them afterwards about what they learned.” The more you make them feel respected and that their voice matters, the more connected and committed to your organization they’re likely to feel.

Effective onboarding is the first step to retaining engaged staff. These individuals, in turn, can become some of your best recruiters. “You can ask them: Where do you suggest we put up posters? Where can we be doing more recruiting? What kinds of work are your friends looking for?” Dornberger says. “Maybe you’re missing these opportunities to recruit good staff.”

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