



JUST ASK

Strategies for Engaging and Retaining Nurses

By Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans

Healthcare managers want their talent to stay. And not just stay, but be satisfied, engaged, and highly productive. Healthcare professionals, at all levels (including managers), want just a little more – of something. Managers and employees alike can get more of what they want by remembering to Ask.

"America's hospitals are hurting for more nurses ... Most hospitals make do with what they've got, even as medical research has established for the first time, a clear link between nursing caseloads and the increased risk of death."

-- The Nursing Squeeze, AARP Bulletin, May 2003

Nursing Professionals in Short Supply

The nursing staffing crisis continues, with no end in sight. Recent professional journals and late-breaking news reports reinforce what we already know. We don't have enough nurses and we won't for the foreseeable future.

So, what are the answers to this dilemma? On one hand, the solutions are as complex and diversified as the problems (e.g. recruitment, educational reform, overwork, burnout, compensation and reward systems.) Organizational leaders, educators and human resources specialists currently spend countless hours and big bucks on these knotty issues --- and they will no doubt spend more time and money in the coming years.

On the other hand – at least some of the solutions may be simpler than we think. If both managers and employees step up to the plate and do their parts, they can increase job satisfaction, engagement and ultimately, retention. A key aspect of doing their respective parts is to ASK.

Managers – Just Ask

Too often we find out what our talented employees wanted during the exit interview. And by then, it's usually too late. Don't wait until they have one foot out the door. Take action now.

"A personal touch and caring attitude are crucial to retention."

-- The Art of Rewarding and Retaining Staff,
Nurse Leader, June 2004,

These statistics remind us of our dire straights

- ★ 126,000 unfilled nursing positions in the U.S. in 2001 with one in seven hospitals reporting 13% of RN positions vacant overall.
- ★ By 2010, 40% of all RNs will be at least 50 years old (expected to retire over the next decade). In Canada, 30% due to retire by 2006.
- ★ One in five nurses plan to leave the profession.
- ★ The proportion of nurses under 30 has dropped from 30 percent to 12 percent.
- ★ Nursing school graduates have dropped by more than 20 percent nationwide. Nursing is being referred to as a "reluctant profession."
- ★ There are 494,727 licensed registered nurses that are not employed in the nursing field.
- ★ By 2020, 1,754,000 nurses will be needed and only 635,000 will be available.
- ★ Turnover for first year nurses is as high as 35 percent, according to an Advisory Board Study. It's 17 percent after the first year.
- ★ Tenet Healthcare reports that a 1% improvement in turnover could save them \$12,000,000 per year.
- ★ RN shortages continue in U.S., Canada, U.K., Ireland, South Africa, and Australia.
- ★ We'll need 333,000 more nurse aides in the U.S. alone by 2006.

Conduct **stay interviews** with the nursing professionals on your team. Start by telling your good people (high flyers and solid citizens alike) how important they are to you and the organization. Then ask them what will keep

them. Or ask them what they want to learn next or what kind of new challenge they'd like. If you don't already have a list of your favorite questions, try some of these, excerpted from *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay*, Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2002:

- ★ What will keep you here? What might entice you away?
- ★ What is most energizing about your work?
- ★ Are we fully utilizing your talent? Are we inhibiting your success?
- ★ What can I do to make your job more satisfying?
- ★ What makes for a great day?
- ★ Do we support your career goals? How could we do better?
- ★ Do you get enough recognition? What kind would you like?

Imagine the answers you might get to these questions. Think how much more you'll know about your treasured employees. And, if you get a response you dread – such as, “I'll stay for a ten percent raise,” don't panic. Be honest, explain the constraints you face, but show you care enough to hear them out and to do something about the request. Say something like, “You're worth that and more to me and to this team. I will see what can be done and by when. Let's meet again next Friday to discuss what I've learned. Meanwhile, what else do you want?” We guarantee you there will be at least *something* they want that you can give.

We've asked over 16,000 people what keeps them at work. The top five responses are: exciting, challenging work; a chance to learn and grow; great people to work with; fair pay; and a good boss. The number one reason healthcare professionals stay is *great people to work with*. (Go to www.keepem.com to participate in the What Kept You? survey and get a complimentary report.)

And -- A Word About Pay

Five decades of research matches what we've learned about pay. Here's how it works. Compensation had better be fair, competitive and sufficient to live on, or your good people will start looking around for more. In other words, it can be a strong dissatisfier. But here's the rub. Even if you pay more than your competition, you won't keep people who are burned out, bored, see no career options or work for a jerk. Or if you keep them physically, you'll lose them psychologically. You know, they quit and stay. Either kind of loss is expensive.

"The staffing crisis is a life-or-death situation, with the quality of patient care hanging in the balance."

-- Sandra Feldman,
AFT Healthcare

After asking, you'll know that one talented employee wants to modify her shift while another is pursuing a leadership role. You can customize your strategies to fit every person's needs.

Nurse Professionals – Just Ask

Now, let's look at the employee side of the engagement equation. When we ask nursing professionals if they love their work, we often hear, “I love it --except for -----

- ✓ The overload I feel --or--
- ✓ The lack of flexibility in my schedule --or--
- ✓ The lack of respect from my boss (or Doctor, or colleague) --or--
- ✓ The paperwork and bureaucracy --or--
- ✓ The lack of learning --- or challenge --- or patient contact



Workplace satisfaction is a two-way street. Yes, it demands effort from your manager and from the leaders of your organization. But it also demands initiative and effort from you.

Ask. If you don't, you're less likely to get what you want. It seems so simple. Yet for some reason, people hold back. They expect their bosses to read their minds. Some just *settle for less* and bring half their hearts (or brains) to work. Others decide it's easier to leave than to ask. Most people eventually realize that no matter where or with whom they work, at times they will want a little more of *something*. And the best way to get that something is to ask.

"Now it's time to put our money where our mouth is and treat nurses with the dignity they deserve."
-- President, Association of Colleges

How ready are you to hold an honest, possibly courageous conversation with your boss, a colleague, a senior leader?

How willing are you to **ASK** for what you really want?

First, you have to be clear about what you really want. Get to the bottom of it. Use some of these questions, excerpted from *Love It, Don't Leave It: 26 Ways To Get What You Want at Work*, Kaye and Jordan-Evans, 2003.

Interview yourself

- ✓ What about my job makes me jump out of bed in the morning?
- ✓ What makes me hit the snooze button?
- ✓ If I were to win the lottery and resign, what would I miss the most?
- ✓ What would be the one change in my current role that would make me want to stay for a *long* time?
- ✓ If I had a magic wand, what would be the one thing I would change about my boss, team, department or organization?
- ✓ If I had to go back to a position in my past and stay for an extended period of time, which one would it be and why?

Now, think about who can deliver what you want. Consider these people:

- ✓ Those with information you need
- ✓ Good listeners and advice givers
- ✓ Decision makers (your boss?)

Consider how and when you will approach them. Consider their preferences:

- ✓ Should you request the conversation by email, voice mail, or face-to-face?
- ✓ Is it best to meet with them early in the morning or after their shift? Monday or later in the week?

How will you open the conversation? Consider these guidelines:

- ✓ Get to the point. Thank them for their time and tell them you have a request to make.
- ✓ Lay it out and be specific. What do you need from them? Advice? Feedback? A new challenge?



Now, create a list of the barriers to asking. Barriers come in all shapes and sizes. Here are some of the most common:

- ✓ **Fear.** Is *FEAR* in the way of asking? Fear of what? The answer? The person? Something else?
It's simple. To get more of what you really want at work, face your fear, plan your approach, and *go for it*.
Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.
—Mark Twain
- ✓ Your boss's (or other decision makers') **mindsets, constraints, or concerns**. Those you ask are often bound by rules, policies, guidelines, and cultural norms. And, they're concerned about fairness.
Anticipate the problems and potential barriers to your request and present ideas for solving them. Seek solutions that work for you, them, and the team.
- ✓ **Lack of WIIFT** (*What's In It For Them?*) Before you go to the request-granter, *stop* and identify the WIIFT. Ask yourself, "What's in it for that person to grant my request? How will she benefit? Is my request a 'piece of cake' or really difficult to grant?" WIIFT in hand, now you're ready to ask.

AND IF THE ANSWER IS "NO?"

Despite your careful planning and strategic thinking, you'll no doubt encounter a "No" now and then. Listen to the reasons for the "No." Then—

- ✓ Ask again (in a different way or at a different time). —or—
- ✓ Ask how *you* can help make it work (brainstorm possibilities). —or—
- ✓ Ask someone else. (Can someone else help with your request?) —or—
- ✓ Ask what's possible, if not this. —or—
- ✓ Ask when it might be possible, if not now. —or—
- ✓ Ask what you can do to improve the way you're asking.

Don't give up.

The best advice I ever got was from a salesman. He said every NO he received got him closer to the inevitable YES.

And when they say yes, thank them with words and in continued great performance.

People tell us that in hindsight, they wish they had asked for what they wanted. Or they wish they'd asked in a more effective way, so a decision maker could have worked with them to make it happen. Don't expect others to take the first step. Don't make them guess, because most often, they'll guess wrong. Be clear. Be prepared. Be collaborative and then **ask for what you want.**

"You need to make the hospital environment a desirable work environment. If you have an environment that values nurses, people will stay."
-- President, Joint Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.



If you don't ask for what you want, you'll simply have to take what you get

*"I stayed with that unit lead because I knew I could trust her.
She showed us that she cared about us and the unit."
-- RN, San Diego, CA*

Word Count: 1,575

Beverly Kaye and **Sharon Jordan-Evans** are the co-authors of the best-seller *"Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay"*. Their new book, *"Love It, Don't Leave It: 26 Ways to Get What You Want at Work"* was voted *Fast Company's January Book of the Month*. Both books are published by Berrett-Koehler. **Beverly Kaye** is founder and CEO of Career Systems International, Scranton, PA, a leader in the design and delivery of Talent Management workshops and other engaging solutions. She is a highly regarded speaker on talent management issues and author of the classic *Up is Not the Only Way* (Davies Black). **Sharon Jordan-Evans** is a prominent speaker, author and certified executive coach. She is president of the JORDAN EVANS GROUP, a company dedicated to increasing organizational effectiveness.

Now available from Career Systems International: *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Retaining and Engaging Healthcare Professionals*, a full day workshop experience for healthcare leaders. For more information: call 800.577-6916, email HQ@csibka.com or visit our websites at www.KeepEm.com, www.LoveltDontLeavelt.com, and www.CareersystemsIntl.com



*Adapted from Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay,
ã 2004 Beverly Kaye, Sharon Jordan-Evans and Career Systems International. All rights reserved.*

