



“What Makes A House A Home?”

Part 4: “Education and Training: The Foundation For Success.”

*“The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think - rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves.” Bill Beattie*

Perhaps, the thing I like most about teaching is watching the response of people once they *get it*. There is a point in every discussion where the light bulbs start coming on and the atmosphere changes from one of disgust to one of excitement.

I’ve had the opportunity to teach in several different formats. My least favorite is the 30-minute inservice. Little can be absorbed in that timeframe. The participants are generally annoyed at being taken away from their work, often without any prior notice. Management staff often bows out, saying “they” – meaning the people who are not managers – need to hear this, but I have work to do. Everyone is looking at their watch and asking how long this is going to take.

This is not an atmosphere for an intellectual exchange. In fact, it is an atmosphere that fuels many of the politics that plague our facilities.

The most satisfying, of course, is traditional classroom learning. As an instructor for L/S Gerontology Seminars, I have had the opportunity to teach full-day classes of 3-6 days duration on a variety of subjects. These classes are provided through NY State education grant monies made available to facilities through the 1199 Training and Employment Fund.

The grant provides for both the participant’s time and for the person replacing him/her for the duration of the class. Union and non-union staff is entitled to participate, and management is strongly encouraged to participate, as well. Equal education and shared dialogue about how to sustain the learning are two of the most significant things accomplished through this type of classroom experience.

At the conclusion of three days of Gerontology training, the participants are forever changed. It is incredible to watch the transformation when there is sufficient time to teach in depth, explore topics, and foster the teamwork and creative thinking that is so necessary to sustaining a quality organization.

Unfortunately, such grant monies are limited. There are few facilities that can afford to offer this type of classroom experience independent of other financial support. So, how do we achieve the quality of this type of education within the limits we face? We have to begin to think differently, to change our focus.

Not only do we have to find creative ways to teach what must be taught, we also need to find ways to inspire and motivate staff to think more responsibly. We have to recognize the value of education.

It has been my experience that equal and comprehensive education changes people. It opens them up. It makes them feel powerful. It makes them feel equal and acknowledged. They take greater pride in their work and in their environment.

Knowledge is power. The more powerful your organization, the more successful you will be.

An education plan has to be adapted to the needs and capabilities of the facility staff. I am a vagabond. I will teach anywhere, anytime there are people eager to learn. It is standard practice for me to include every discipline in every conversation. The more staff members know about how each contributes to the organization, the less likely there will be gossip, jealousy, and unnecessary competition. Inclusion also fosters open dialogue and collaboration on shared challenges.

Every plan has to include a strong educator. The person organizing the education program must be someone who enjoys learning and is able to inspire that in others. This shouldn't be a secondary responsibility. If a solid organization is your objective, you have to make the education of your staff a priority.

In many facilities, nursing assistants make up the majority of students in the classroom. When I lecture on dementia or behavior management, I ask for representation from every discipline. Consider the issue of elopement. There is a strong possibility that the person likely to confront a confused resident attempting to leave the facility will not be a nursing assistant. It could likely be a housekeeper, security guard, or dietary worker – all of whom should have had the same education and training as nursing assistants on the subjects of dementia, behavior management, and the regulatory expectations with regard to elopement.

Regulations, and how to interpret and apply them should be the subject of ongoing discussion with all staff. I have met many managers who struggle with regulatory compliance. Maintaining regulatory compliance is vital to the health and well being of your organization. Teaching regulation and the ways in which compliance can be monitored on an ongoing basis by all staff will help your organization avoid the gearing up and winding down survey cycles that have proven inefficient.

There are several things your organization can do immediately to begin improving your education plan:

- Survey all staff with regard to their satisfaction or lack of with the facility's current education process. Ask for input on ways to make learning more effective, topics of interest, and other suggestions that could improve the program.
- Evaluate the interest and effectiveness of the person currently responsible for education and training. Make changes where necessary, and involve more people in the teaching role. There is no need to have a single educator. Many managers and those staff members with longevity or special skills are capable of contributing to the education program.
- Take the learning out of the classroom. Educating in the work environment will save time and frustration for everyone. Rather than having staff come from all over for one teaching session, have the educator travel to several environments and gather all staff contributing to that environment for discussion. In cases where there might be several staff trained to teach a particular subject, multiple sessions can occur simultaneously. Some of the facilities I work with have begun to develop peer-teaching programs to expand their resources. Others have paired management and staff together in teaching partnerships.
- Lastly, spend as much time on developing ways to sustain the education as is spent on organizing it. Include everyone in finding ways to stay ahead of trends and challenges through heightened awareness, strong communication, and innovative ways of motivating people to be curious and open to education.

The investment you make in education and training will afford you a remarkable return. With the knowledge and skills necessary to satisfy the expectations of today's consumers and legislators,

your organization will shine. You will have planted the seeds needed for your organization's growth and development. You will have built a strong foundation for lasting change.

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