

HR Pulse

The Official Publication of the American Society for Healthcare Human Resources Administration

HR and Education

Operating in sync, Not Silos

By Rebecca Sell

"Working together on the front-end can only strengthen the results and move the organization to realize its vision and goals more effectively and efficiently."

When Brenda Compton accepted a position in housekeeping at St. John's Health System (SJHS) in Springfield, Missouri, five years ago, she was convinced that her prospects for career advancement were slim. Compton lacked the training and skills needed to apply for a higher level position, and with her children approaching college, she felt that it was too late to consider returning to school herself.

Compton's supervisor thought differently and convinced her to take advantage of an eight-month program offered by the hospital, School at Work (SAW). SAW prepares entry-level workers for better paying positions within healthcare by acting as a bridge to college enrollment. The instruction combines coach-based mentoring and teaching, as well as computer training with Internet and DVD technology to allow co-workers to attend classes during the workday. There are two components: education and career development. Students receive an introduction to relevant subjects such as anatomy and physiology and medical terminology, while brushing up on basic skills like computer literacy and communications. At that same time, students create an individualized career and learning plan and build a network of advisors and mentors to shepherd growth.

After her graduation, Compton enrolled in the nursing program at



Ozark Technical Community College and successfully applied for a position as a nurse aide. She says that participating in School at Work "made me realize that I can learn new things and compete with the younger generation." Encouraged and motivated, Compton's ultimate goal is to become a registered nurse at St. John's.

Programs like School at Work address the growing need for frontline development. In today's tight labor market, organizations like SJHS are seeking creative ways to foster professional growth and stave off workforce shortages. When SJHS's parent system, Sisters of Mercy Health System (Mercy), announced a system-wide implementation of School

Continued on next page...

...Continued from previous page

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at Work in 2007, it was part of a larger initiative to develop programs that would reward and promote dedicated entry-level co-workers.

"This is a vital program to provide advancement opportunities to Mercy's entry-level co-workers," explains Jim Jaacks, Mercy's Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer.

Jim Brookhart, SJHS Chief Human Resources Officer, says, "We got involved in piloting SAW at St. John's Health System in Springfield because not only is it consistent with our values of dignity, justice and stewardship, but it also makes good business sense to invest in our co-workers in a tight labor market. Positioning SJHS and Mercy as an employer that helps co-workers

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realize their career goals within the organization is a great recruitment and retention strategy."

"The Mercy spirit displayed by the coaches (individuals selected from Mercy's hospital facilities to coach and instruct co-workers selected for the SAW program) was phenomenal," adds Barb Grayson, Executive Director-Compensation in Human Resources. "The coaches were not only excited about the program and their role in training co-workers, but they were honored to fulfill that responsibility. In fact, they asked if our Mission Department would create special prayers that they could share in their classrooms!"

Mercy maintains 18 acute care hospitals, a heart hospital, outpatient

care facilities, physician practices, skilled nursing and long-term residential care facilities, clinics, a managed care organization and other health-related services. Operations stretch across seven-states and provide employment to approximately 28,000 co-workers and 1,000 physicians.

This has Mercy, like health systems all across the country, keeping a close eye on the approaching retirement of the baby boomers, shortage of talent, and generational differences. Leaders are reaching across department lines to face these challenges offensively. In the case of supporting the School at Work program, Mercy's centralized organizational development and learning department, known as Mercy Learning Resources, takes an active role by working collaboratively with local Human Resources departments to recruit students, facilitate the program, provide advisory assistance after the program's completion and collect data regarding program outcomes.

Chief Learning Officer Kelly Pingleton says that "HR and education goals should be in sync, not in silos. Most days, we are supporting very similar strategies and programs around our most precious resource—our human capital. Working together on the front-end can only strengthen the results and move the organization to realize its vision and goals more effectively and efficiently."

Pingleton also stresses the importance of developing strategic plans that are first and foremost in support of the overall mission, vision, values and strategies of the organization.

The "Hiring for Mercy Fit" program is an example of this philosophy. Human Resources and Mercy Learning Resources have collaboratively developed interview tools that train leaders on effective interviewing skills. The objective is to not only recruit talented people, but find those who will fit well in Mercy's faith-based healthcare ministry and adhere to the system's core values of dignity, justice, service, excellence and stewardship. The guide helps leaders assess a candidate's



interpersonal skill, work ethic, and value set by providing telephone and face-to-face interview templates.

Mercy's Job Description/Performance Evaluation system (JDPE Tool) is another collaborative tool. This innovation lets Mercy leaders manage job descriptions and performance evaluations electronically. JDPE Tool's automatic updates feed from the Lawson HR/Payroll system. Co-workers may log-in to do self-evaluations; the manager then receives and performs the review electronically. Mercy Learning Resources developed and provided enriching curriculum to teach and hardwire the use of this tool.

The tight partnership is also illustrated through annual Mercy Co-Worker Engagement Survey. HR administers the survey and coordinates reporting while Mercy Learning Resources provides the training courses to support the initiative for new and seasoned leaders.

In regards to Mercy's core values, strategy and altruism often converge. The base objective of these programs is to attract, maintain, and develop an engaged workforce.

"Healthcare in the broadest sense is not just taking care of the physical, it is a holistic ministry," said Tony Kinslow, Vice President of Human Resources for Mercy. "As a Catholic healthcare organization, Mercy has a mission that goes beyond what takes place at our facilities and embraces the whole person. What we do for our co-workers is...give them hope and the chance to succeed." ■

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