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St. Vincent's teaching employees skills needed to advance careers

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JACKSONVILLE — Last year, Michael Swain was working the cafeteria grill at St. Vincent's hospital and though he had a desire to move up the company's career ladder he couldn't see any opportunities.

"I told my boss I was going to quit because I wasn't getting anywhere," Swain, 41, recalled. "He told me about this new program starting and told me I should wait."

Within six months of starting the hospital's School at Work program in September 2004, Swain was promoted to be a patient escort in the Radiology Department. "I feel like I'm a member of a team," Swain said.

St. Vincent's has developed a three-tiered program targeting entry-level employees. The program starts with courses that teach basic skills, then moves to introducing employees to jobs requiring higher skills, and the final step involves college tuition reimbursement. Employees can enter at whatever level is appropriate.

"We've always had tuition reimbursement but some entry-level employees weren't even considering it," said Liz Bruno, director of Educational Development for St. Vincent's.

The three-step pyramid program won a Best Practices award from the Florida Hospital Association in May.

Swain was among 15 employees who graduated in April from the School at Work portion of the program, Bruno said. Another nine employees joined this year's course which started in September and will end with a graduation in April 2006.

"We help them look in a methodical way at their career path," she said. "It helps us grow our own, so to speak. We're also growing loyalty."

The hospital purchased the School at



SPECIAL

Liz Bruno, director of educational development at St. Vincent's, teaches a class that aims to advance entry-level employees.

Work program from Catalyst Learning, a Louisville, Ky., company, which charges \$495 per enrollee, said Lynn Fischer, founder and president of the company.

While the company started in multiple industries such as hospitality, distribution and retail operations, it now focuses on health care. "The goal is to unleash the potential in the entry-level employees," Fischer said.

The majority of students, 43 percent, will move to a clinical job. Thirty-three percent change to non-clinical support, and 24 percent become clerical workers, according to Catalyst Learning.

To enter the course, employees must pass a basic reading and math skills test and get a recommendation from their department head. "We want to make sure we are getting

folks who are committed to the hospital," Bruno said.

Swain said he had an affinity for St. Vincent's long before he started working there. Five years ago, after an auto accident, doctors there were able to save his arm from amputation.

He also is motivated to work with cancer patients after helping his sister struggle with the disease that took her life in 2001. "Cancer patients really touch my heart," said Swain, adding his father also died of cancer and his mother and another sister are survivors.

Swain plans to attend Florida Community College at Jacksonville in hopes that it will help him advance further at St. Vincent's. A counselor from the college had come to speak during one of the School at Work classes.

While most of the 157 hospitals who have used the School at Work program opt for a 1 1/2-hour a week class, St. Vincent's classes meet three hours a week from 9 a.m. to noon on Thursday. The classes introduce them to the other jobs available at the hospital. In part, they learn by shadowing employees and studying technical terms.

When two-thirds of the employees recommended by department heads failed the basic skills test to enter the program, Bruno created another class called Tools for Your Future. This class is done on the employees' own time and works on reading, math, computer and problem-solving skills.

"This has really produced benefits we didn't expect," Bruno said. "Talking to managers and supervisors, we're finding that even though these were good employees to begin with they are much more enthusiastic and much more motivated."

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