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Program helps workers realize their potential

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When Jo Ann Shaw became vice president of human resources for BJC HealthCare in 2001, she wanted to make a long-term strategic change at her new workplace.

The result was the Center for Lifelong Learning, where any employee, from a maintenance worker to a highly trained technician, could get technical training and earn degrees and certificates.

Shaw, who came from the University of Chicago Hospitals and Health System, saw the center as one way to combat high turnover, build a stronger work force and boost morale.

Like many operations that want to promote from within, she believed the Center for Lifelong Learning could help employees realize their potential in some aspect of health care.

"In the two and half years we've had the program, we've had 150 graduates," Shaw said. "Of those who've gone through it, we've had no turnover. Even more important, some of them have been promoted."

About half of the graduates have decided to take more courses, which run the gamut from medical technician training to earning a master's of business administration degree from Webster University .

In the last couple of decades, on-site training and degree-producing programs have swept the private and nonprofit sectors. For Shaw, the reason was as simple as "we felt BJC had a responsibility to give our employees training so they'd be able to advance."

In the School at Work program, one of the most basic that BJC offers, employees and BJC share the time commitment: Each donates one hour a week to the eight-month course.

"Our unique focus is on entry-level employees, which make up 15 to 20 percent of the work force," said Lynn Fisher, founder and chief executive of Catalyst Learning of Louisville, Ky., contractor for the course.

Fisher's company, which specializes in planning and presenting courses in hospitals, has 170 clients in 25 states.

"The employees may have a high school diploma, but they're essentially stuck," she said. "These are people in dietary, housekeeping, environmental services and entry-level office positions."

School at Work, she said, focuses on helping employees sharpen reading, writing, math and computer skills, so they can become eligible for promotion. Another facet is helping each employee develop a personal plan for more learning and advancement, Fisher said.

What if Shaw has badly miscalculated? What if the employees she's help to rise in the organization take their skills, certificates and diplomas and go to a competitor?

"On the contrary, it increases loyalty," said Fisher. "All the training research shows that employees are more likely to stay where the hospital invests in them."

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