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## A Nurse's Viewpoint

### Knowing What Nurses Want

*By Sabina Gesell, for HealthLeaders News, May 12, 2004*



Nurses are working under staggering conditions today as daily patient loads increase and care becomes more complex. Nurse satisfaction and job satisfaction remain pivotal to nurse retention and patient care. Hospitals can indeed simultaneously maintain a satisfied, loyal work force, and create positive experiences for their patients. Far from mutually exclusive, the two ideals are tightly intertwined and actually rise and drop together.

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assess the current state of nurse satisfaction with their current employment situation, Press Ganey Associates conducted a study of 4,699 nurses working at 36 hospitals in 2003. The hospitals included were predominantly urban, nonprofit hospitals. Approximately half were non-teaching hospitals, while



25 percent were major teaching hospitals and the rest were minor teaching hospitals. The hospitals ranged in size from 48 to 765 beds, with an average of 277 beds.

Nurses were mailed a comprehensive, anonymous survey asking them to rate various aspects of their employment situation and hospital culture including job satisfaction, recognition, pay, benefits, job security, participation in decision making, supervision, senior leadership, management of change within the workgroup and within the organization, physical work environment, physician relations, staffing, coworkers, and the hospital's community image and patient focus.

The report focused on two key questions:

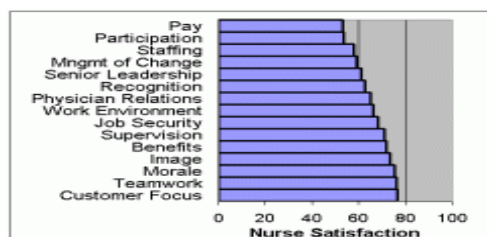
**1. How satisfied are nurses with the various dimensions of their current employment situation?**

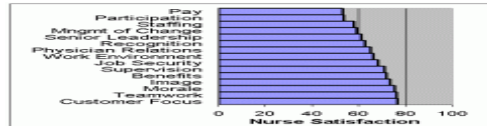
Nurses were most satisfied with their hospital's emphasis on patient care and customer service, the existing level of teamwork among coworkers, and their own job satisfaction (Figure 1). Specifically, the highest ratings were given to:

1. The degree to which the organization emphasized the importance of customer service.
2. Work giving nurses a feeling of accomplishment.
3. Teamwork and cooperation within work groups.
4. Work making good use of nurses' skills and abilities.
5. Employees going out of their way to support patients.

Overall, nurses expressed the least satisfaction with employment aspects related to pay, participation in decision-making, and staffing (Figure 1). However, when we hone in on the specific issues with which nurses express the greatest dissatisfaction, included among the expected pay, participation, and staffing issues are items related to senior leadership's active listening and awareness of major employee concerns. One hypothesis is that this is evidence of nurses ultimately holding the organization's leadership responsible for the current staffing challenges and pay inequities they experience.

*Figure 1. Nurse satisfaction with various aspects of their employment situation*





## 2. What can executives within the industry do to boost nurse satisfaction in the future?

There are several approaches to selecting areas to target for improvement. One is to select the areas nurses express the most dissatisfaction with, i.e., pay. Doing that, one runs the risk of ignoring issues that are more strongly related to overall satisfaction than the targeted area. Another approach is to select the areas that are most strongly related to overall satisfaction, i.e., giving nurses the support they need to adapt to change in the organization. Doing that, one runs the risk of focusing on areas with which nurses are already relatively satisfied.

A third approach combines the two strategies above: target those issues nurses are least satisfied with and deem most important in their evaluations of their employment satisfaction. Guided by the need to allocate limited resources efficiently and effectively, this is the approach taken here to create a priority index that highlights where improvements are needed most to raise nurse satisfaction (see list below).

According to nurses themselves, the highest priorities for increasing their employment satisfaction involves better managing change within the organization, receiving recognition for excellent performance, increasing nurse participation in decision-making, and improving relations with senior leadership. Note that the request for a pay increase is not at the top of the list.

### Priority index for improving nurse employment satisfaction

1. Provide nurses with the support they need to adapt to change in the organization.
2. Improve communication regarding change in the organization.
3. Recognize excellent performance.
4. Ask members of work groups for their opinions before making decisions.
5. Handle promotions fairly.
6. Senior leadership needs to respond promptly to most problems.
7. Senior leadership needs to be aware of major concerns of employees.
8. Give nurses opportunities to influence policies and decisions that affect their work.
9. Improve nurses' satisfaction with their involvement in decision-making.

10. Senior leadership needs to listens to employees.

Senior management's awareness and responsiveness to employee concerns are important factors to address because they are not only linked to greater satisfaction among current nurses, they are also important to current employees in recruiting others. Six of the top 10 issues correlated to the possibility that nurses would recommend their hospital to a friend as place of employment revolve around their relationship to senior management (see list below).

**Issues most highly correlated to nurses recruiting friends to the organization**

1. Excellent performance is recognized.
2. Senior leadership's actions reflect the organization's mission and values.
3. Senior leadership is doing a good job of planning for the future.
4. Senior leadership really listens to employees.
5. Senior leadership can be trusted to be straightforward and honest.
6. Nurses receive the support they need to adapt to change in the organization.
7. Promotions are handled fairly.
8. Senior leadership promotes high quality patient care.
9. Nurses are satisfied with their involvement in decision-making.
10. Senior leadership responds promptly to most problems.

There is considerable overlap in the issues in greatest need of improvement and the issues most closely linked to referrals. Specifically, improvements in the following areas should be linked to increased nurse satisfaction and increased referrals: recognition of excellence, fair promotions, senior leadership listening to employees and responding to problems, participation in decision-making, and support to adapt to changes within the organization.

It is also noteworthy that one issue surfaces on all three lists: Senior leaders' ability to listen to employees is one of the top five issues of nurse dissatisfaction, a top ranking priority, and also essential for nurses to recruit friends to the organization. It may be that senior leaders modeling the ability and willingness to listen to employees will result in supervisors and managers more eagerly listening to employees, thereby giving nurses the support and tools to effectively listen to patients.

The satisfiers and dissatisfiers listed here are averaged across hospitals. They can be used as an industry

report card and might be used to guide improvement efforts until internal data are available. For hospitals to achieve the highest levels of nurse employment satisfaction and the associated benefits, they should commit to measuring satisfaction on an ongoing basis and commit to using the data to guide improvements and assess their successes.

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