

## Background & Significance

- Healthcare systems continue to experience sustained nursing shortages, escalating patient acuity, and financial constraints.
- Although competitive compensation remains important, current evidence demonstrates that salary alone does not predict engagement or long-term retention (Shah et al., 2021).
- Work environment factors, including leadership authenticity, recognition, autonomy, and psychological safety, exert a stronger influence on nurse satisfaction and intent to stay (Kelly et al., 2021).
- The standards of the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (2021) reinforce that healthy work environments characterized by meaningful recognition, shared decision-making, skilled communication, and true collaboration are directly associated with improved workforce and patient outcomes.

## Purpose

To **implement evidence-based, fiscally neutral** engagement strategies within a large academic Pediatric ICU to reduce turnover, strengthen professional identity, and improve engagement **without** increasing operational costs.

## Strategic Framework

### Engagement as Culture, Not Cost

- This initiative reframed engagement as a cultural investment rather than a financial expenditure.
- Literature supports that burnout, lack of empowerment, and diminished belonging, not compensation alone, drive voluntary turnover (Kelly et al., 2021).
- Authentic leadership and psychological safety are consistently associated with higher work engagement and resilience (Bamford et al., 2021; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

## Theoretical Underpinnings

### Psychological Safety Theory

- Edmondson's work on psychological safety demonstrates that individuals are more engaged, innovative, and committed when they feel safe to speak up without fear of embarrassment or retaliation (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).
- Interdisciplinary collaboration and inclusive leadership behaviors were intentionally structured to strengthen psychological safety.

### Authentic Leadership Theory

- Authentic leadership, characterized by transparency, ethical decision-making, and relational engagement, has been positively associated with nurse work engagement and reduced turnover intention (Bamford et al., 2021).
- Leader visibility and appreciative rounding supported this framework.

## Key Strategies Implemented

### Meaningful Recognition

- Recognition was intentionally embedded into daily workflow rather than positioned as a sporadic or financially driven incentive.
- Strategies included structured peer-to-peer nominations highlighting clinical excellence and compassionate care, leader rounding grounded in appreciative inquiry, recognition moments during shift huddles, and formal acknowledgment at staff meetings.
- Recognition emphasized behaviors aligned with unit values, safety excellence, teamwork, and family-centered care.
- Recognition was designed to reinforce professional identity and belonging, two powerful predictors of engagement.

### Peer Mentorship

- A structured peer mentorship model was implemented to support novice and transitioning nurses through formalized mentor-mentee pairings.
- Mentorship extended beyond orientation, incorporating goal setting, reflective dialogue, clinical coaching, and professional development planning.
- Experienced nurses were supported in their mentorship role, reinforcing leadership development and succession planning.
- Supportive professional relationships play a critical role in mitigating stress and buffering burnout, particularly in high-acuity environments.

### Shared Governance

- Unit-based shared governance councils were strengthened to ensure frontline nurses had meaningful influence over clinical practice standards, quality improvement initiatives, scheduling input, and workflow redesign.
- Decision-making authority was transparent, and feedback loops ensured staff understood how their input informed operational changes.
- Participatory leadership structures promote autonomy and professional empowerment, critical components of employee engagement.
- Authentic and inclusive leadership models are associated with increased work engagement and decreased turnover intention (Bamford et al., 2021).

### Interdisciplinary Collaboration

- Structured interdisciplinary rounding and collaborative quality improvement initiatives were implemented to reinforce mutual respect and shared accountability for patient outcomes.
- Nursing contributions were intentionally highlighted during team discussions, reinforcing the value of clinical judgment & bedside expertise.

### Wellness & Resilience

- Recognizing burnout as a systems-level issue, leadership implemented low-cost, high-impact wellness strategies integrated into unit operations.
- These included structured peer debriefings following critical events, leader check-ins, flexible scheduling input where feasible, recognition of personal milestones, and access to mindfulness and micro-restorative resources.
- Resilience-supportive leadership behaviors (visibility, empathy, and psychological support) have been shown to reduce burnout and improve engagement (Wei et al., 2020).

## Outcomes Observed

### Following implementation, the unit demonstrated:

- Decreased voluntary nursing turnover
- Improved engagement and leadership accessibility scores
- Increased participation in shared governance
- Strengthened interdisciplinary collaboration
- Improved unit culture metrics

**These outcomes align with national evidence linking healthy work environments to improved retention and patient safety, (AACN, 2021; Kelly et al., 2021).**

## Implications to Nursing Leadership

- Implementation of these fiscally responsible engagement strategies within a large academic science center's pediatric intensive care unit was associated with decreased nursing turnover, improved engagement survey metrics, enhanced interdisciplinary collaboration, and strengthened organizational culture.
- These findings align with broader national evidence demonstrating that engagement-centered leadership positively influences patient safety indicators, staff resilience, and retention (AACN, 2021; Bamford et al., 2021).
- Reframing engagement as a cultural investment rather than a financial expenditure allows nurse leaders to operationalize high-impact strategies without increasing labor budgets.
- By cultivating meaningful recognition, mentorship, shared governance, collaboration, and wellness, leaders create environments where nurses thrive professionally and personally. Sustainable engagement is not driven solely by compensation; it is built through connection, empowerment, and a shared purpose.

## References

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