Behavioral Health Workforce: Retention Strategies

Recommendations for the Colorado Behavioral Healthcare Council

The vitality of the behavioral health workforce is an essential component to sustaining the long-standing community-based models of care while improving population health outcomes. As the health care needs of the country evolve through factors like the opioid crisis or the growing aging population, progressive recruitment and retention strategies must be implemented to attract top talent capable to solving complex health care problems. Behavioral health organizations hoping to be on the frontline of this innovation will benefit by looking both inside and outside of the industry for keys to maintaining an educated, prepared, and engaged workforce. Below are three strategies organizations can utilize to improve their workforce retention.

### Collecting and Formalizing Retention Data

In 2015, the University of Minnesota’s Research and Training Center on Community Living (RTC on Community Living) published an article recommending four retention metrics for organizations to use to measure effectiveness in workforce development practices and monitor trends in the workplace.**[[1]](#footnote-2)** The RTC also published five tools to provide organizations with uniform data collection strategies for each of four retention outcome measures. The four outcome measures include: turnover rates, average tenure, vacancy rates, and percentage of workers who leave within 6 months of hire.

Collecting and maintaining standard retention data allows organizations to compare outcomes across time and between organizations. If implemented and calculated consistently, organizations can compare their retention and recruitment data for an entire region or state.

### Image result for climb ladder iconCareer Laddering: Preparing Staff to Move Up

Conscientious organizations have their employees’ upward mobility high on their list of priorities, knowing that their best employees will not stay at a job for long if they are not growing. Career laddering provides employees with a clear and comprehensive pathway towards growth and advancement within organizations.[[2]](#footnote-3) This serves as both a retention strategy and a way to improve the employee experience. Employees looking to “move up” can do so by exceeding performance metrics, obtaining an advanced certification, or achieving continuing education requirements, with subsequent incentives ranging from wage increases to increased leadership opportunities or additional vacation time.

When designed thoughtfully and intentionally, career laddering based on an individual employee’s desires and skills can encourage individuals to invest themselves within the organization. Conversely, when career laddering is not done well, individuals might be working hard to “move up” to a position that does not suit them.[[3]](#footnote-4) It is critical when creating career ladders to know the aspirations of employees and create paths that benefit the organization and those that work for them.

### Strategies to Support and Promote Staff

****There is much that organizations can do to influence the stability and advancement of their behavioral health workforce. Proven strategies include:

**Regular one-on-one supervision meetings** tofoster healthy professional relationships, communicate about performance, delegate tasks, manage time and resources, and develop employee competencies.

**Annual stay interviews** allow employees to share why they like working at the organization, what keeps them there, and anything that might be a barrier to continuing to work there. This proactive approach allows organizations to reinforce positive aspects or address concerns more effectively than during an exit interview when it’s too late to change.

**Offering management training** for new or aspiring managers to develop and cultivate necessary skills in supervision, providing feedback and coaching in addition to other managerial responsibilities.

### Mentors and Career Coaches

Mentorships and career coaches offer many mutual benefits to employees and organizations. First, they develop relationships and assist in acclimating new employees to workplace culture. Second, mentorships can catch performance lapses early on and begin coaching to mitigate further performance concerns. Third, and perhaps most useful, mentorships and career coaches allow for natural flow of industry or workplace knowledge from mentor to mentee.[[4]](#footnote-5) This limits the amount of institutional knowledge that is siloed within the company’s most tenured employees.

Research conducted by Cornell University revealed a set of best practices in implementing mentorships that produce better promotion and retention of diverse groups. Organizations using mentorships to retain employees should mindfully match mentors with mentees based on personality similarities. Employers should make sure mentors and career coaches are the right fit for newly hired employees. Not all mentorships are good mentorships; thoughtless or haphazard mentorships can do more harm than no mentorship at all.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Organizations looking to start the process of career coaching and mentorship for its employees should emphasize the non-disciplinary relationship of the coaching. Mentorships could be implemented across organizations but should be managed with on-the-ground supervisors or leaders who are able to keep individuals at the forefront of the efforts. Ultimately, mentorships are a great way for organizations to retain a diverse workforce, develop relationships with the organizations, and foster skill exchange between experienced and less-experienced employees.

1. Larson, S & Sedlezky, L. (2015). Assessing Retention Outcomes: Turnover Calculator. Research & Training Center on Community Living (RTC), Institute on Community Integration (ICI) University of Minnesota (U of M). Retrieved From <https://ici.umn.edu/products/docs/TurnoverCalculator.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. SHRM. (n.d.). Developing Employee Career Paths and Ladders. SHRM. Retrieved From <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/developingemployeecareerpathsandladders.aspx>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Harter, J. and Rigoni, B. (2015). State of the American Manager: Analytics and Advice for Leaders. Gallup. Retrieved From <https://www.gallup.com/services/182138/state-american-manager.aspx>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Noel, P.; Andersen, L.; Abdul-Razzaq, D. (2019). The Benefits of Mentoring. JPO Service Centre. Retrieved From [www.jposc.undp.org/content/jposc/en/home/for-current-jpos-sarcs/learning-and-career-development/Mentoring-Programme/the-benefits-of-joining-a-mentorship.html](http://www.jposc.undp.org/content/jposc/en/home/for-current-jpos-sarcs/learning-and-career-development/Mentoring-Programme/the-benefits-of-joining-a-mentorship.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Conboy, K; Kelly, C. (2016). What Evidence is There that Mentoring Works to Retain and Promote Employees, Especially Diverse Employees, Within a Single Company. Cornell University ILR School. Retrieved From <http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/CWP%20Session%201%20Mentoring%20to%20Retain%20and%20Promote%20Employees.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)