

Reducing Turnover During a Pandemic: Growing Leaders at an NCI-Designated Cancer Center

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1. Background

Is it true that people don't leave jobs, they leave managers? Following the 2019 work culture survey, Duke Cancer Institute (DCI) recognized a novel approach was needed to improve staff retention. While work culture required improvement, more concerning was the 2020 turnover rate at 20 percent. Further, DCI experienced rapid change and growth as research, research support, and community outreach and education (COE) staff adapted to new leadership roles. Though new managers attended HR-focused manager training, this did not address the unique leadership challenges at an NCI-Designated Cancer Center. To meet the increased need to develop engaged leaders, DCI implemented the leadership development program.

2. Goals

The goal was to reduce turnover and improve staff morale by enhancing leaders' ability to grow diverse, resilient teams and improve staff retention at all levels.

3. Solutions and Methods

The DCI designed a leadership series with 11 required courses for all research, research support, and COE managers. Nine cohorts of 8-10 newly appointed and seasoned managers comprised the series. Based on adult learning methodology, courses were designed using an efficient "chunked" approach and incorporated repetition to optimize learning. Cohorts met biweekly and completed one to two hours of pre- and post-coursework per class. Content focused on resilience; change management; teambuilding; communication; and diversity and inclusion. While primarily aiming to improve leadership, management, and communication, participants also improved technology skills through immersion. Participants developed presentation skills by delivering course summaries to the cohorts. Pre-, mid-, and post-program evaluations were implemented to measure growth. Participants identified their specific challenges including navigating difficult conversations; managing and motivating a remote workforce during a stressful pandemic; and retaining employees. Participants addressed individual needs by creating action plans that included reflection, goals, and tracking additional optional training.

4. Outcomes

Because this initiative is tied to staff retention and work culture, this is a long-term investment in DCI leaders. Actual program impact cannot be measured until the next work culture survey in 2022. Mid-program evaluation data indicated coursework and content meets or exceeds 87.5 percent of the participants' expectations; 50 percent of participants want ongoing touchpoints with their cohort and 50 percent want touchpoints with additional cohorts. One hundred percent of participants self-reported incorporating course content into their daily management style.

5. Lessons Learned

Category: Training, Quality Assurance, Remote Monitoring, and Auditing – Work in Progress

Based on mid-program feedback, the leadership team is becoming more engaged, self-aware, and emotionally intelligent. Although early in program implementation, participants have reported increased awareness of their leadership and communication styles. While managers were intentionally assigned to specific cohorts, encouraging collaboration and breaking silos, the most senior managers should have comprised the first cohort to reinforce the content middle managers would later receive. Looking forward, cohorts will be created for staff with leadership potential, filling a need for succession planning and career development. DCI will determine program impact and future training opportunities based on data from the 2022 work culture survey. Until then, plans include ongoing learning in the form of an on-demand monthly quick tip that reinforces concepts from the series and reconvening cohorts quarterly to share successes and address new challenges.