

Strategies to Improve Clinical Research Staff Engagement, Retention, Career Development and Performance at an NCI-Designated Cancer Center

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1. Background

In 2019 the clinical unit of the NYU Langone Health (NYULH) Perlmutter Cancer Center (PCC) Clinical Trials Office (CTO) had an annual turnover rate of 34.4 percent, retention rate of 59.3 percent, promotion rate of 2.9 percent, vacancy rate of 13.9 percent and a NYULH Human Resource (HR) employee engagement survey index of 56 percent engagement or favorable responses (80 percent response rate, 12/15 staff). A clinical research staff satisfaction survey was conducted in 2019 showing 30 percent of staff not feeling supported in their role, 55.2 percent not feeling valued, 34.5 percent without a formal orientation, 55.2 percent expressing overwork and 77.8 percent expressing a need for more standard operating procedures (SOPs). Survey themes included a lack of standardized policies, orientation and mentorship, under-staffing and a perceived lack of leadership support, lack of role delineation between clinical research coordinators (CRCs) and nurses (CRNs) and pay disparities. Clinical leadership sought a partnership style approach with clinical staff and management to systematically address each theme.

2. Goals

Taking an incremental and multi-pronged approach the goal was to decrease the CCU turnover rate to <25 percent, increase the retention rate to >75 percent and promotion rate to (>10 percent) and maintain the vacancy rate at <15 percent while increasing the employee engagement to greater than 70 percent as assessed independently by NYULH HR.

3. Solutions and Methods

Interventions to improve the metrics included: targeting culture change by establishing a High Reliability Organization (HRO) program (2021-2023), creating clinical career ladders for CRCs and CRNs with market analyses and pay increases (2019, 2021, 2022), implementing an evidence-based clinical orientation program (2019), developing career promotional tracks to clinical management (2021), creating a CTO staff-lead mentorship program (2021), forming CRN and CRC unit practice counsels to support staff problem identification, solution generation and communication with management (2022), increasing internal CTO SOPs and establishing a formal orientation program, and maintaining a hybrid and flexible work-model post-pandemic.

4. Outcomes

In 2022 the clinical unit annual turnover rate reduced to 24.6 percent (decrease 9.8 percent; $p=0.15$), retention rate 77.1 percent (increased 17.8 percent; $p=0.033$), promotion rate 39.9 percent (increased 37 percent; $p=0.001$) and maintained a vacancy rate of 14.7 percent ($p=0.46$) despite increasing positions from 40 in 2019 to 65 (63 percent increase). The NYU HR employee engagement index increased to 73 percent (increase 14 percent; $p=0.12$) with an 83 percent response rate (52/63). Starting in 2020 all internal and external audits were passed and internal audit findings decreased by 80 percent. In 2022 a central review for preventable Reportable New Information submissions showed a 30 percent decrease. SOPs increased from 14 in 2018 to 33 in 2022.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Tackling clinical research operational challenges requires an innovative and systematic approach in partnership with staff, management and HR. Future directions include: creating a novel partnership with the NYU School of Nursing Masters of Research Program to support training new research RNs, collaborating with NYU HR to augment the CRN and CRC ladders to include a fourth and most senior step, and further reducing the turnover rate to <15 percent and increasing the engagement index to >80 percent.

Figure:

