

Keeping talented people at all levels in the NHS is one of biggest challenges we face. This is where top-notch line managers really come into their own, says **Karen Lynas.**

In the line of duty

What is the most common reason people quit their job? Pay? Promotions, development, stress? No, a recent Gallup survey confirmed the main reason is their boss. Your line manager has the most immediate control over your job satisfaction, and your sense of purpose and belonging. If that relationship fails, you're unlikely to stick around for long.

Turnover in teams is a significant challenge for productivity, performance and sustainable improvement. At a time when the search for talent in healthcare is extremely tough, securing your team is a key responsibility for line managers and leaders. So how do you become the kind of boss people want to work with and stay with?

There's been lots of research into what makes a good line manager, so here's my summary of the most important things you need to consider.

1. Provide leadership

What people most often want from their line manager is good leadership. Many of us work in healthcare because we have a sense of purpose and collective endeavour. Great line managers build that sense of purpose into their work. Above all, leadership is about taking people with you on a journey to do something that matters to all of you.

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Make sure you spend time and energy on jointly creating that vision, sharing it often and giving people a better understanding of how their unique contribution makes a difference.

2. Being good at your job

Being a line manager requires that you do *your* job well, not everyone else's. That's often forgotten in healthcare. I've spent lots of time with senior nurses whose response to a problem is to roll up their sleeves and work with their nurses on delivering care. That can be helpful, but it can also be counterproductive and disempowering for staff. It becomes more of an issue with bigger teams, or technical teams with lots of experts who know very different things to you. So concentrate on developing skills for yourself so that you can better support your staff.

Line manager training is really

important; don't make the mistake of thinking your experience alone is sufficient, or that you'll pick it up as you go along. You need to learn how to:

- do the day-to-day work of people management – including allocating work and rotas
- manage budgets, information and resources
- monitor and manage performance and quality assurance
- measure operational performance – crucial for developing a high performing, continually improving service
- deal with your own boss – communicating those demands to your staff in a way that promotes corporate efficiency and unity.

Deploying these technical skills well is a key part of your unique contribution as a line manager.

3. Feedback and review

There's nothing like a good appraisal. Unfortunately, in the NHS, people sometimes get exactly that – nothing like a good appraisal. No other single contribution as a line manager is more effective in developing the people you manage. Helping frame their role so they understand their contribution, what's required of them, what good looks like, how performance is



managed, and how you can work together to create the best chances of success and fulfilment in the job, is the foundation of a great appraisal. Then, you need to give good feedback.

Critical feedback is about professional, observable behaviour, and is best given using real examples. Don't get personal – keep it professional, but don't obfuscate. The most common fault in giving critical feedback is losing the message by trying too hard to soften it.

Positive feedback should follow the same principles: be clear, open, honest and give lots of real examples. You are more likely to get the changes in behaviour and performance you want by encouraging the good stuff rather than focusing on the bad. And forget the sandwich metaphor! It doesn't work, confuses the message and, worst of all, makes you look inauthentic.

Of course, great managers give feedback all the time – contemporaneous feedback is much more likely to lead to engaged and empowered staff.

4. Train and develop your team

The best determinant of staff retention is investment in training and development – on the job training, secondments, stretch assignments, formal

courses, mentoring – whatever best suits each individual. Make sure you know the motivations, interests and ambitions of your staff. How can you help them feel constantly engaged, motivated and fulfilled by their job? What are you doing to grow talent and skill in your team, to prepare for succession when people leave, to ensure everyone's practice is being continually refreshed? If your staff can't develop and grow their skills in this job, they'll find one where they can.

5. Create 'doable' jobs

It's a hugely important part of your role to make sure you are matching the needs of the service with the practical realities of a job that someone would be able – and want – to do. Management thinker Peter Drucker used to refer to undoable jobs as "widow-maker" roles – the term refers to dangerous ships which a succession of captains had failed to command successfully. When someone fails, it's often as much about poor job design, unreasonable demands and a broken context, as about the individual's capacity to deliver. You want the roles you manage to be stretching, fulfilling, full of purpose and with the right balance between independence and control. Don't create jobs where the only

appropriate candidate would be someone who wears their pants outside their trousers – create them for real people, who have real lives and who want real, doable jobs.

6. The give and the get

One of the hardest jobs of a line manager is tackling poor behaviour or poor performance. But it's a defining characteristic of a good manager that they do it consistently, fairly and appropriately. Tackling this issue doesn't have to be punitive, it can be developmental. If you can understand the root cause of poor performance or behaviour, there will often be fairly obvious ways to address the problem positively that lead to a good outcome for all, which should be your primary aim. Are they in the wrong job or is there something going on outside of work? Are they lacking confidence or feeling unskilled or unsupported? But avoiding tackling the issue is divisive and toxic. It leads to poor cultures, escalating performance issues, lack of productivity, stress, absence and higher turnover. When all reasonable measures have been taken, without the desired outcome, you need to take bold action to move people on.

If you can't change the people, change the people. Your team need you to be able to do that.

7. Value your staff

If you want to attract and retain the best and brightest, the team culture needs to embrace staff as your most valuable asset. Your team is measured not just by what you do, but how you do it. Your staff need to know that you place as much value in them as they do in their own staff, patients and colleagues. This isn't something that can be faked – you can't ignore it when things get tough, and you can't think saying the right things will ever make up for doing the wrong things. Culture is something you need to work hard at. ■

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