

## CASE STUDY

# Fanning the Flame

*to Retain Boomer Nurses*

## Pitt County Memorial Hospital

*This is one of four case studies, prepared for the MetLife Mature Market Institute by David DeLong & Associates, demonstrating how companies are successfully shaping their cultures to motivate their Multi-Generational employees. These case studies are part of the Multi-Generational Tool Kit developed by the MetLife Mature Market Institute.*

### Overview

One hospital in rural eastern North Carolina was concerned about its ability to retain veteran nurses and keep them motivated to mentor younger colleagues. So in 2003, it launched an intensive initiative, Fanning the Flame, designed to re-engage experienced nurses. The program re-energized this Boomer group and created a new resource for Intergenerational knowledge transfer.



Over the last 20 years, Pitt County Memorial Hospital (PCMH), a former community hospital, has grown into a 761-bed medical center and teaching hospital, serving rural eastern North Carolina. With more than 6,600 employees, including 1,783 nurses, the hospital's plans for continued growth depend in part on its ability to recruit and retain skilled health care professionals.

The cost of replacing an experienced nurse is about \$65,000. That, however, does not include the costs of lost knowledge, having fewer experienced nurses to mentor new staff, and the potential

decline in quality of patient care when veteran nurses leave.

PCMH's experience is part of a larger national U.S. trend that shows 450,000 nurses are expected to retire in the next decade, according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. In addition, another 650,000 new nursing jobs will open up to meet the growing demand for health care. Poor rural regions like eastern North Carolina have found recruiting nurses a particular challenge, which makes retaining veteran staff even more critical.

### Research Identified the Problem

In 2002, PCMH began doing research to learn why its older nurses were leaving and what they could do about it. Informal surveys and focus groups revealed that nurses who had been at the hospital more than 10 years felt they were not advancing professionally. "Many were telling us they were kind of burned out," recalled Dianne Marshburn, administrator of research. "They would see the sign-on bonuses for new nurses and say, 'You are doing a lot for young nurses, but what are you doing for us seasoned nurses, now that we have been here 10, 15, or 20 years?'"

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## Fanning the Flame Provided a Solution

Fanning the Flame shows how a hospital can cost effectively engage a targeted group of valuable employees in ways that benefit the *entire* organization.

### What is Fanning the Flame?

Fanning the Flame is a three-day program conducted once a year at a quiet seaside retreat for 25 veteran nurses who are nominated by their supervisors or colleagues. Nurses attending the retreat receive three paid education days.

**DAY ONE** is devoted to “de-stressing,” helping participants relax and disconnect from their hectic work and family lives. Massages are available, along with music therapy, strategies for using humor in nursing, beach combing, flying kites, collecting shells, and enjoying some quiet time.



**DAY TWO** is devoted to reinforcing the value these nurses bring to the hospital as part of an effective team, while also exposing them to new opportunities for growth. Participants hear from other nurses like themselves who have successfully expanded or redefined their roles. Speakers describe the benefits of doing

research, taking on leadership positions in nursing organizations, participating in clinical teaching programs, going for national certification in their specialty, or pursuing advanced nursing degrees.

Melynda Crisp, a staff nurse, recalls:

*“I’d been working with patients having gastro-intestinal testing and endoscopic examinations for four years when I did the program. I needed something to help me grow professionally. They had asked me to go into the program two years before, but I thought, ‘I don’t have time for this.’*

*Finally, I agreed to do it just so they’d stop asking me, and I’m so glad I did. We were told again and again how wonderful we were and how valuable our knowledge was. To hear that over and over and to not have the responsibility of your kids for three days—it was complete relaxation!”*

**DAY THREE** is focused on “job sculpting.”

The objective is for participants to create new goals for themselves and to leave with a plan of how they want to rethink their practice and their career. Options include choosing to become a clinical teaching associate, to go back to school, to work for national certification, or to more actively mentor new nursing grads.

“We want to keep them at the bedside, but we also want these nurses to grow professionally, so we acquaint them with opportunities to expand their practice specifically in the areas of leadership, research, professional development, and community service,” says Judith Kuykendall, a facilitator for the program.

Of course, Fanning the Flame is part of a larger set of initiatives that PCMH pursued to implement its overall performance improvement strategy called Journey to Excellence. Of 144 graduates in six years, only four left the health system. And 73% reported Fanning the Flame influenced their decision to continue working within the hospital system.

Here are five ways that this program helps rekindle employee engagement with PCMH:

### 1 Investments that Clearly Benefit Individuals Build Loyalty

Fanning the Flame participants consistently expressed surprise at how the program was clearly focused on helping them succeed as individuals. Seeing the hospital invest in their personal success when the organizational benefit is less clear tends to generate loyalty and appreciation. “This program makes you reflect on yourself and what you can do in nursing,” says Clarice Carmon, a graduate who has since become a nurse manager. “It helps you focus on what your strengths are and what the future could hold for you. You feel more loyal when you feel appreciated.”

### 2 Make Career Development Options Explicit to Find a Better Fit

Veteran nurses learn about opportunities they did not know existed. Equally important, they hear from nurse colleagues who have successfully pursued these developmental paths, which helps fuel their imagination. Crisp recalls, “You are learning about new opportunities for growth you have never heard of. There were so many presented that at least a couple were interesting. It is like a booster shot. The last time I felt this enthusiastic was when I was a new nurse.”

### 3 Follow Up Sustains Motivation to Improve and Change

Showing high performers their options for growth and development in an environment where they already feel appreciated creates even more incentive for improvement. This

motivation is sustained with an annual reunion of all Fanning the Flame graduates. Graduates report what they have been doing to advance their careers in the last year.

“I am very competitive,” admits one nurse. “Those reunions keep me motivated. You do not want to stand up there and say you have done nothing in the last year. I want my flame to be the brightest.”



### 4 Building New Relationships Increases Connection to Organization

Research shows that the quality of personal friendships reinforces employee engagement. Since no more than two nurses can attend the program from any department each year, participants inevitably develop relationships with colleagues from other parts of the hospital and from other hospitals in the system. “I would never have met Clarice if I had not gone to this program,” says Crisp. “It is great to have contacts in different departments. I’ve since gone to her with questions.”

### 5 Increased Value Placed on Wellness

Ironically, nurses whose job description is to take care of others, while often balancing the demands of family life, can lose perspective on their own health needs. Being “pampered” and “waited on hand and foot” for three days is a fun reminder to pursue more healthy behaviors. “Fanning the Flame focuses on how you can grow, so you can serve others,” says Carmon. “But in the process it makes you think more about taking care of yourself.”

## Benefits for a Multi-Generational Work Environment

Fanning the Flame has several important benefits in a multi-generational work environment. First, it clearly improves productivity, as well as retention of more experienced nurses, as evidenced by comments from recent graduates:

- “I was just doing my time and getting closer to retirement. But this program gave me incentives to improve myself. It was the difference between keeping a stagnant employee versus one who is now continuing to improve.”
- “I was just puttering along in my career. This was presented to me as a reward. And what better way than to send you to the beach for three days and pamper you. It was a spiritual experience. When I got back I was like a new nurse again. I became nationally certified in my area of specialization. I was really pumped up.”
- “I’d been at this hospital 13 years when I did the program. I thought I would stay here because that is just what you do. But after Fanning the Flame, I had a different outlook.

I realized I could do more, instead of just accepting stuff that came at me. Now I pay more attention to decisions being made that affect the hospital. How is this going to affect me? The hospital? The city? Before, I just accepted what happened.”

Fanning the Flame costs about \$1,800 per participant, which is a good investment compared to the cost of replacing even one experienced nurse, or the hidden costs of an unmotivated older worker. But another benefit of re-energizing veteran employees is the increased availability of motivated mentors to work with the younger nursing staff.

At PCMH, investing in older generations has proved to be a great retention tool, as well as an unexpected benefit for the next generation. Helping one generation serve another is at the heart of an Intergenerational approach to building effective organizations.

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*Certification by a national nursing association validates specialized nursing expertise and has been shown to lead to higher quality patient outcomes. Hospitals recognize the value of certification with increased salary and career opportunities.*

## David DeLong & Associates

David DeLong & Associates is a research and consulting firm that helps organizations build future workforce capabilities and accelerate knowledge transfer in the multi-generational workplace. Dr. DeLong is the author of *Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce* and is a research fellow at the MIT AgeLab.

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