

Look to staff as a source of solutions, expert urges

By Mary Jenkins

Can a lack of trust among employees and management hurt a hospital's bottom line?

The answer to that question, one expert in employee communications suggests, can be found by connecting the dots.

"Trust is very much a bottom line issue," says Les Landes, founder and president of Landes Communications of St. Louis. "You have to remember that hospitals — like other organizations — have customers. Call them patients if you will, but they are customers in the truest sense of the word, and in the end, their satisfaction largely dictates an organization's success.

"Hospitals also have employees, and in the end, their sense of trust and goodwill toward the organization dictates how they relate to customers, and how satisfied those customers will be," he says. "Connect the dots, and the picture becomes clear. Making employee trust and well-being the top strategic priority is more than a nice thing to do. It's just good business."

Landes believes that the trend of downsizing, corporate takeovers and makeovers during the past two or three decades has taken its toll on the sense of security and loyalty that people feel about their employers.

To build trust, he says, "Management needs to do whatever possible to ensure that they don't undermine the two most basic human needs — security and self esteem. The reason is pretty obvious. When those needs are met, people tend to respond

positively. When they are not met, they respond negatively."

The single most important piece of advice Landes gives people if they want to foster trust in

the workplace is that "when behavior or performance problems occur — mistakes, bad hair days, etc. — always approach people as the source of the solution, not the cause of the problem.

"If organizations do no more than that and truly appreciate what it means to people, they will fundamentally alter the nature of their working relationships and build the level of trust," he emphasizes.

Landes has these additional recommendations for managers who want to build employee trust.

- Make employee well-being the number one priority of the organization because employees tend to treat others, including customers and patients, the way they are treated.
- Foster a climate of open and honest communication through a "no secrets" approach to internal communications.

- Establish a clear set of common values and principles, involving as many people as possible in the process and using deliberate dialogue to keep them vital and relevant.
- Routinely get large and small groups of people together to discuss specific situations and compare the process and outcome of those situations with the values and principles the organization espouses.
- Set up visual measurement systems, accessible to all, that give employees the critical information they need to see how the organization is doing and what they can do to make improvements.
- Get rid of the parent-child model of relationships between management and employees and replace it with an adult-adult model.
- Establish a policy of sincere trust and belief in people and set up policies, systems and practices that demonstrate management's trust in employees.
- Replace traditional performance appraisal systems with performance development systems. Performance appraisals where the manager acts as "judge" and the employee is treated as "defendant" are a "fundamentally flawed way" for adult human beings to interact.
- Set up formal learning systems, not just occasional workshops and seminars.
- Before making any decision, pass it through the trust filter. "Ask yourself what it will do to either enhance or diminish the level of trust within the workplace."

Landes is nationally known for his expertise on the role of communications in quality improvement. He is the former director of communications for Pet Incorporated, a former instructor at the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication, and served as a program director and creative supervisor for Maritz Inc., the nation's largest provider of business communications and performance incentives.

