

Developing Excellent Customer Service Skills in Long Term Care Facilities

“People don’t want communication with an organization or a computer. They want to talk to and interact with a real, live, responsive, responsible person who will listen and help them get satisfaction.”

- Theo Michelson

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Healthcare quality improvement has usually been focused on the clinical aspects of care. It is often ignored that healthcare quality starts with people! Inspiring leaders who empower their employees are the key to improving the quality of services in long term healthcare. Customer service has become so important these days because facilities have become almost identical in what they have to offer. So where do families identify significant differences? It is in the perception of friendly, caring and attentive service.

The importance of training caregivers in ways to provide friendly, caring and attentive service cannot be over emphasized. Facilities should have in place a formalized training program educating employees on how to meet the emotional needs of the residents and families. This training program should provide skills enhancing employee attitudes, and knowledge in building effective relationships with residents and their families. Modeling of these attitudes and skills should continuously be done by all leaders, managers and supervisors in the organization.

Quality Care/Customer Service is the result of competent well-trained employees performing daily assignments consistently well, including demonstrating the ability to connect with families and residents. The quality of care provided must be universal across all departments as families have chosen the facility based on all of the services offered. Often families will rarely remember how quickly a job was done, but they will always remember how well it was done, especially if they feel as if they are important and cared about. The better the quality of care, the better the image of the facility, which ultimately translates into the greater success of the facility.

The training programs to improve customer service should focus on the following points:

Active Listening - Employees should be **active listeners**. Listening leads to understanding and understanding leads to meeting the resident’s needs. Listen effectively and without judging. Active listening helps the caregiver build a relationship of trust and caring with the resident and their family members. It helps both the resident and family members to feel cared about and understood. Take the time to listen to the person’s tone of voice, notice their body language and give them your undivided attention.

Communication – Communicate clearly. Speak slowly. Repeat yourself until you are confident you are understood. Ask residents if they understand or have questions. This may take some additional time, but will alleviate potential problems.

Anticipate and Identify - Try to anticipate and identify the needs of the resident. Most needs of residents and their families will be emotional rather than logical. Make no judgments. Reassure and clarify what the need may be. The more you or your staff knows your residents, the better you will become at anticipating their needs.

Elicit Feelings of Appreciation and Importance - Make the resident feel important and appreciated. Treat them as individuals and not just another resident. Be patient and kind. Communicate with them on a regular basis. Thank them for their cooperation or compliance.

Knowledge: Knowledge is power. There is nothing worse than not knowing the objectives, roles and expectations in any given situation. Take the time to help the resident and family understand your expectations, policies, routines and systems so there are no surprises. This knowledge will greatly reduce and possibly alleviate the client's potential anxious, angry or confused feelings.

Give More Than Is Expected: Giving more than is expected will foster a greater connection and alliance with the residents and their families.

These methods can be applied to all relationships within a facility including every employee or member of the team. Treating your employees with consideration and respect creates a higher regard for the clients residents and families they serve. Organizational cultures that encourage people to connect can generate a passionate commitment to achieve greater employee and customer satisfaction. A win win for all!

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