

Incentive Planning

Entering the field of oncology means caring for patients who may die of their disease, and it takes a certain type of person to do this work. For those special people, cancer care is a privilege—an opportunity to do meaningful work for patients and families who desperately need their help. In that way, the work is incredibly rewarding in and of itself. Although we all work for money, most of us find real meaning in the effect we have on others around us. But what about those who are behind the scenes of our cancer care? How do we incentivize the work experience for them?

Since the pandemic, many jobs have changed. Some nonclinical workers in the health care system have even seen their jobs become hybrid or fully remote. For people who are no longer physically immersed in the infrastructure of an office or facility, the whole experience of being part of a health care system can feel different. Zoom meetings, phone calls, and emails just don't carry the same level of intimacy as talking face-to-face with a colleague who has been dealing with patients. Burnout or boredom can creep into workers' thoughts, and the work may begin to feel mundane, worthless, or futile.

As a health care leader for the genitourinary clinic at the Duke Cancer Center, I have struggled with how to motivate our staff, and have come up with a few successful approaches that I would like to share:

Expressions of gratitude. Perhaps the most undervalued of emotions is gratitude. We all appreciate help of any magnitude, but too often we take it for granted. No matter how many times we say it, a sincere “Thank you” can go a long way to helping our colleagues feel needed and recognized.

Callouts. These are similar to expressions of gratitude because they recognize someone's effect on us or our patients, but a callout is a more social way of recognizing this impact. Staff meetings are a great place for callouts so that the employee can be recognized by their peers, who in turn are incentivized to earn a callout themselves.

Social events. With the lack of regular physical interactions at work, it is important to create a portfolio of in-person gatherings outside of work. Recognize that employees will have different limitations on their time; some people may prefer an after-work get together, whereas others might gravitate to a weekend party with family included. Not everyone needs to attend every event, but pay attention to employees who are not attending any.

Team incentives. Individual bonuses and raises are great, but the morale boosts from them are short-lived. Team incentives, on the other hand, create a group goal and benefit that everyone can participate in reaching. The group incentive should be material but does not have to be expensive: T-shirts, tickets to a sporting event, or a recreational outing are all great incentives that everyone can feel good about. Multiple team incentives throughout the year or a cumulative goal for the year end are all effective at helping the staff motivate each other, and bring an added incentive to staying productive.

Publish their stories. If you have the resources, creating a newsletter or other periodic publication is another way of recognizing individual or team contributions. Patients see only part of the infrastructure involved in their care, but highlighting the staff members who work behind the scenes can bring to light their work and its effect on patients in their community. These stories can be enduring and shed a positive light on patients, staff, and the health care system we work in. Narratives can help us all feel grounded in the mission of our work, and can especially help those who are physically isolated feel part of something special.

Sincerely,



Daniel J. George, MD

