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The “Magic” of Interviewing Prospective Hospital RN Case Managers

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Introduction

Don't you wish you had a crystal ball when it comes to hiring a new RN case manager? If only there was a blueprint to follow! Let me tell you from experience that the hiring process is difficult at best these days with so many legal restrictions. Internal staff nurse candidates that you think you know well can be difficult because they may have a distorted concept of what really a case manager does. You certainly do not want to put in several weeks to train a “novice” case manager, to then find his or her concept of the role was not based on the realities of the role.¹

So you decide to interview an experienced case manager applying for the position. A good thing to ask is which model of case management is he or she competent in? Competency can take greater than 4 to 5 years of experience to truly acquire. If you are looking for a hospital case manager he or she should have hospital experience in a similar model to qualify as competent, in which case less training and quicker orientation would be needed. The master case manager (you know the one) can tell you the appropriate discharge plan for the most difficult case without a hesitation. These folks are few and far apart, but if you find one, do everything you can to keep them.

Case management roles in managed care are not equivalent to hospital case management. Neither are Workers Comp case management roles. The newer roles of Navigators are not hospital case managers, although there are some aspects that are similar. All of these roles can lead a candidate to become a certified case manager, which is definitely a desirable qualification. However, keep in mind that although certifications attest to a strong body of knowledge, they do not measure skills and they don't guarantee the necessary attitude or potential talent to perform in your specific organization.

Use Your Senses

Use all your senses to explore learning about a candidate. Look at the resume. What caught your eye about the layout? Were there lots of misspellings? Do the listed work experiences have sequenced dates? Again, does this person have the hospital experience that usually produces the case manager everyone wants on their team?

- During the interview look at the candidate's personal appearance and hygiene. Even if case managers wear lab coats over their street clothes, is this the person you want to represent you and your department? Is the candidate dressed well for the interview? Sometimes candidates think “It doesn't matter what you wear or how you look for an interview” but IT DOES! I have found that a suit or jacket (I prefer the color blue or

black) often indicates a team player or person with leadership potential.

- Feel the atmosphere within the room. Is there a flow of questions and answers? Is the candidate able to think and respond thoughtfully? Is there a willingness on their part to share their past work experiences and the reasons they left those positions. Can they name more than one example of when they truly made a difference for a patient and family? (Do they even mention families?)
- How much does the candidate know about your hospital and your model of case management? It is very important to allow a candidate new to case management to tell you what they think a nurse case manager does and if you have social workers, what they imagine they do every day. Has the interviewee done any background reading about case management?
- Can you almost taste or smell the abilities of this person sitting before you? What is his/her style as they address the defining answers to the questions you have asked. Their style of conflict resolution can be seen through these types of questions. For example: “Mrs. A is discharged but she has a question for her physician. Her physician is known for his impatient and brisk replies when questioned. What do you do?” (The correct answer is to get the answers for the patient). “If the physician should get verbally abusive, what do you do?” (Reporting this physician to the director of case management and, by policy, to the physician’s manager should not be a hesitation.)
- What do you hear during this interview? In order to really hear what the interviewee is saying, don’t talk more than he/she does. A candidate must have good communication skills that can articulate details and can be understood easily. They should not have an accent that makes understanding them totally impossible because it will also be impossible for patients, families, and physicians to understand them. Hopefully you do not hear the chewing of gum or the nervous tapping of a shoe. Speaking of shoes, what do you find acceptable during an interview? Dressing appropriately includes work style shoes, not flip flops! Flops are what you’ll get when you hire inappropriately dressed candidates.

Getting the Gut Feeling or “Sixth Sense”

Several things trigger this process for me:

- The types of roles or duties in the history of the candidate I like to see and have the most success with are charge nurses. The reason is that to be successful they must have the skill to balance several issues at the same time, problem solve, use critical thinking and avoid conflicts. If conflict should occur they must have the talent to resolve them.
- ICU and ED nurses can also have these ideal qualities by the nature of their roles. They have more than one patient to deal with as does a case manager.
- Medical complex patients are often the most difficult cases for case managers in any model. Candidates with experience in medically complex patients are a plus.

Several questions to “seal the deal”:

- Can you work weekends? Response should have a willingness to fulfill the needs of the department and the organization.
- Do you have any planned prepaid vacation in the near future I need to know about? (Once I was trapped with a pre-paid vacation over the holidays within a month after hiring the candidate.)
- Tell me your definition of team work. What I am looking for is an answer beyond the standard answer of “working together”. I ask working toward *what* together? I hope to hear something that sounds like the goals of the department. It could be collaboration with therapies to help the patient to achieve a timely discharge. I hope to hear that team work means “When I need help someone will come to my rescue and in turn I will be there as a resource to others”. Team work is really the ability to work together toward a common objective. It will allow people to attain uncommon results.
- The last question I ask is, “Complete this thought: I just finished for the day and I am on my way home. I’m thinking this was a great day at work. Define great day at work for me.....?” Hopefully the answer is what you want to hear and you will know by what you feel if this is the right candidate to join your team.
- Trust me: Do not settle for just any candidate because you’re desperate to fill a vacancy. The right person is out there. Do not let HR force you into taking anyone you do not believe is a true fit for the role.

Endnotes

- 1 To avoid confusion, The Center for Case Management suggests that whether you are interviewing staff nurses from inside or outside your hospital, you have them shadow a competent case manager for at least half a day (after signing a confidentiality agreement). That way, the candidate can see the role in action first hand, including the software used, the stresses, necessary teamwork and collaboration, and ideally, a care coordination rounds.