SCHEDULING ON-CALLS: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE
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Our Post Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU), a closed unit, is staffed by regular salaried nurses. This unit is open 24/7 for any surgical or procedural admissions throughout the year. Majority of the professional salaried nurses (PSN) work staggered shifts from 7 AM to 10:30 PM. In addition, there are three night nurses and two weekend day nurses. During the week, the day and evening shift staff take turns staying over or coming in early as “on-call”. They also cover calls for weekend days and nights as well as during the week nights. Most of the staff are not happy with the different on-call scheduling options, especially when a staff calls in sick. Several policies have been in place to assign on-calls whenever a night or weekend nurse is on vacation, or absent. This has caused dissonance among the staff, disconcert among each other, which also resulted in disappointment, frustration, low morale, fatigue, absences and anger.

During a staff meeting, the staff verbalized issues and concerns regarding on-call schedules. Several suggestions and options were taken into consideration. The unit staff nurse representative, unit scheduler and nurse manager came up with different resolutions to try out.

One of the proposals initially tried was:
When the four week time schedule was posted, on-calls were pre-scheduled chronologically for those night staff, weekend days and night staff who go on vacation. When another night or weekend staff calls in absent, those scheduled calls were moved to cover the current absence. It then became inconvenient for those who have made plans based on the original pre-scheduled calls. Some staff were ignoring phone calls when it was their turn to be on-call. Several staff didn’t like this proposal, so another one was utilized. The scheduler decided to try a different recommended proposal. Once the four week schedule is posted, night or weekend pre-scheduled on-calls already plotted will not be moved. For any absences, the succeeding staff on the list for on-call will cover the absence. On-calls are now done in cycles, adjusting to the needs of the department. This revised system allows staff to make switches in their assigned calls without losing their place in the cycle thus allowing for more flexibility and stability of knowing when their calls will be. The schedule is more predictable, with minimal movement of staff’s calls. After six months of trying this new approach, the staff is happier and less discontent.

Engaging staff in problem solving and decision making has empowered them to try different ways or approaches to improve their work environment. The beneficial outcome of this staff engagement and staff autonomy was improved staff satisfaction with their work schedule.