The Foundation to Build the Right Team

As an experienced Chief CRNA at two major medical centers, I have firsthand knowledge of the value of building the right team. It is amazing how easy it is to manage a team that is skilled, motivated, and engaged. When I was a nurse anesthesia educator, it quickly became apparent that student selection was the most important task of the year. When we selected the right students, teaching was easy. Likewise, later in my career, when I became a Chief CRNA, I quickly learned that when you build the right team, managing is easy.

Over the past few years I have been asked how I assess applicants for a clinical anesthesia position. What makes a strong candidate stand out from the other? How does the manager select the right person? Likewise, when assessing existing personnel for promotion, what can an individual do to demonstrate they are a valuable asset to the employer? Below are some lessons I have learned along the way.

Knowledge is power: The goal is to attract the best and the brightest applicants. Generally speaking, new graduates have a working knowledge of all the latest information. They have studied, been tested repeatedly, and they have passed the certification exam. Applicants who have successfully worked other places have experience to go along with their knowledge base. With either a new graduate or an experienced applicant, it’s not what they know, but rather their ability to apply the knowledge. At the interview, ask questions to assess how they process information and how they relate it to the situation at hand. Ask questions like, “You are assigned to a case where a patient has a condition with which you are not familiar. How do you develop a care plan to ensure patient safety and satisfaction?”

Preparation: The applicant has convinced you that they have sufficient knowledge. Now, can they do the job? It’s time to let hands show what the brain knows. You are looking for the person who arrives on time, demonstrates solid clinical judgment, works within safe parameters, and seeks assistance when appropriate. You want a team member with solid clinical skills and a great work ethic. At an interview, ask open-ended questions about major cases that the person has done. What were the considerations during setup? Did the case start on time? I like to ask the person, “Describe a time when you developed a plan and set up for a major case and at the last minute were asked to change the plan.” The answer will indicate organizational skills as well as tolerance for frustration and a willingness to work in a team environment. Another favorite interview question is, “In preparing for this interview, what did you learn about us?” Some will get the ’deer in the headlights’ look and make up something about the wonderful reputation of our hospital. Others have been to the hospital and department websites; they have done research and they know about our mission, vision, and core values.

A person who prepares well for an interview also prepares well for cases. Preparation can be an indication of work ethic. Surprisingly, more often than not the person will be a self-proclaimed super star. You can bring a person back to reality by asking, “If I asked your current colleagues/boss about your work ethic, what would I be told?” Work ethic and technical abilities are both topics for a follow-up phone call to the former employer or references.

Technical ability: The vast majority of CRNAs have the knowledge and skills to do the job. Occasionally, however, people make it through the education system with considerable knowledge but limited technical skills. Applicants may think they are skilled in everything but anesthesia. At the interview, I ask applicants to tell me about technical skills that they feel are strengths. I also ask, “If we hire you, what opportunities would you like for us to provide to enhance your growth in areas where you feel less skilled?” This is a non-threatening question which provides insight into the applicant’s perceived weaknesses. As with work ethic, technical skills can be discussed during a phone conversation with a reference.

Versatility: We all have favorite and least favorite cases. Challenging ourselves to do a variety of cases develops a broad range of clinical skills. Having a conversation about the favorite types of cases done by the applicant as well as familiarity with a variety of cases gives insight into the applicant’s versatility. During the interview, you might ask, “While preparing to do a gallbladder, you are notified that a gunshot wound is en route from the ER. How do you handle it?” Some staff will go with the flow while others have limited tolerance for last-minute case changes. At our hospital, flexibility is a valuable asset and something we seek in a team member.
Teamwork: Working collaboratively within a group is essential both in the anesthesia care team model and independent practice. Not only do you want your new hire to get along with surgeons, anesthesiologists, and other members of the interdisciplinary healthcare team, you want the person to willingly help other CRNAs in the group. You want to hire the person who supports and encourages the skills and positive qualities in coworkers. Two questions at an interview to assess teamwork are, “Please describe what collaborative practice looks like to you,” and, “Tell me about a time when your colleague stepped in to help you, and a time when you stepped in to help your colleague.” Not only will you hear a great story, you are establishing the expectation that teamwork is required in your group.

Communication: This is a foundational attribute for predicting overall success. The literature related to patient safety states repeatedly that the success or failure rates of safety are rooted in communication. Effective communication both within the CRNA group and with the perioperative team is essential. Proactive participation in care planning, morning huddles, and PACU handoffs all require good communication skills. At the interview, ask the applicant to describe how they communicate their need for help when in an uncomfortable clinical situation or unsure in a clinical case. Also, try to determine how the applicant views other CRNAs who communicated a need for help. Does the applicant offer an insecure colleague clear and useful advice or does he throw the teammate under the bus?

Customer relations: Healthcare has evolved over the past 30 years from physician directed to sharing healthcare responsibility with the patient to patient-driven healthcare. Many patients search the Internet and understand their medical and surgical conditions. They have expectations of the healthcare that they will receive. Patients expect that you, too, are knowledgeable and that your team will work well together to ensure a successful outcome. You want an employee who is competent at the head of the table and can connect on a personal level with the patient and the patient’s family.

When interviewing, ask the applicant to describe a time when they felt a strong connection to a patient and the patient’s family and then to describe the difference it made in the outcome. By asking this question, you are planting the seed that customer service is valued in your workplace.

Civility, Equity, and Respect: Nobody likes to be criticized. Ask the applicant how he or she responds when given constructive criticism regarding their practice or judgment. In the discussion that follows you can reinforce that your workplace encourages professional growth. Professional growth involves constructive criticism.

Engagement: This is the magic word in management. Articles, chapters, and entire books are written about employee engagement. It is said that many people seek employment to make a living and to make a difference. Assessing engagement gives insight about the person’s desire to make a difference and, in so doing, enhances the reputation of your group. At an interview, I frequently set up this question, “One year after you start working with us we will do an annual performance review. Describe what a successful first year would look like.” Most candidates will talk about developing technical skills and comfort at the head of the table. In addition to case management, others will talk about developing best practice guidelines, doing research, or improving workflow. Which will you hire?

CRNAs bring a variety of skill sets to a variety of practice settings. We don’t all wear the same shoes, but the shoes that we wear must fit. An applicant needs to fit in with your department goals and your personal management style. Before you interview CRNA candidates, make your own list describing the traits that the ideal employee brings to your workplace. Develop a question to assess each of the qualities you desire and that measures each person objectively. Hire the right people, build the right team. The effort that you put into assessing candidates and hiring the right people will pay dividends for years to come.