

## Workers help keep hospital on right TRAC

One of a series

By RUSS SMITH  
The Lima News

The attitude if it's not broken, don't fix it, is outdated and not acceptable at Lima Memorial Hospital.

What is the rage at the east side hospital is growth, empowerment and improvements brought about through something called the Team Rebuilding Action Commission (TRAC).

The program was launched in February 1991. More than 800 employees have participated, said hospital President John B. White, noting the concept is not unique and is typical of current management styles endorsed by progressive companies.

A mixture of hospital employees who normally do not work together are assigned a project. About 400 teams have been formed, of which 250 have so far



News illustration by  
Greg Hiltnerbrand

completed their assignments. Each group is given 30 days to

develop a recommendation, White said.

"It is intra- and interdepartment arrangements to come up with solutions. Problems are broken down into small units. It has been ongoing since we developed customer relationship training. ... It started with a management development course that affected 120 hospital managers," White said.

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"Managers have been trained not to be fearful of questions from associates and customers. ... You have to have the mind-set of the culture for improvements and changes. We are now going through problem-solving training."

To date, TRAC efforts have resulted in a savings of \$2 million for the hospital, White said. Numerous small projects have contributed to the savings.

One of the notable TRAC suggestions was the creation of a "fast track" for the emergency room during peak times in the evening.

"People were leaving the hospital without treatment because they had to wait too long. We found 35 people were leaving a month. That has been reduced to 13 or 14 per month at the last count," White said, noting patients are now "in and out in about an hour."

A triage nurse sends people with minor illnesses and injuries to the fast track set up in the nearby area which is used during the day for endoscopy, said Virginia Keeran, clinical manager of emergency and endoscopy.

Another TRAC suggestion led to the reduction of the hospital's hazardous waste volume and an annual savings of \$120,000

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"Each TRAC doesn't necessarily hit a home run. But together, they improve customer satisfaction, quality, improve productivity and make the organizational climate a better place to work," White said.

"Hospitals are made up of imperfect people. But through the process of allowing associates to participate and contribute, it gets better," he said.

Vonda Rempfer, president of the local chapter of Ohio Nurses Association which represents nurses at Memorial, agreed that working conditions have improved since the 3½-month strike by more than 200 registered nurses in 1989.

"We feel that communications are much more open. Our working conditions are much better. We have some input on practice-related issues as well as our working conditions and benefits," Rempfer said.

Kevin C. Webb, vice president of clinical services and continuous quality improvement, admitted the hospital had problems before the strike. But working conditions have changed and now everyone is listened to, he said.

"I don't think people think about (the strike's impact) today. It is not something in their minds on an everyday basis," Webb said.

Before the strike, Memorial had 300 beds for patients. Today, it has 200.

"But hospitals today don't need as many beds. It would probably have been 200 today (even without the strike) because less is done as inpatient and more as outpatient," White said.

Employment at Memorial also has dropped from 1,300 before the strike to 1,100 today, but White said that, too, is typical of hospitals across the country.

"When I got here, I began to focus on the future and built on past accomplishments," he said. "I recognized we had to change the culture and the need to empower people."

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# Employees at Memorial find solutions to problems

By JERRY HERTENSTEIN  
News Business Editor

Sue Kistler and Vonda Rempfer know firsthand that Lima Memorial Hospital's Team Rebuilding Action Commission (TRAC) program works.

Kistler and a former fellow employee, Mary Ann Kromer, originated through TRAC a recycling plan that is now effectively being used throughout the hospital, Kistler said.

Rempfer is actively involved with a TRAC that has helped expand the nursing staff in home health care. Kistler is an information systems analyst at the hospital and Rempfer, a registered nurse, works in the hospital's home health care department.

A cardboard and aluminum cans recycling program was launched on Earth Day in April 1991, Kistler said, and on Earth Day this year, April 21, a program for recycling paper was initiated.

"We (Kistler and Kromer) perceived a problem of paper being thrown away unnecessarily and working together came up with a solution," Kistler said. Ten people representing five departments of the hospital — radiology, buildings and grounds, sports medicine, management and informa-

tion systems, and housekeeping — were originally involved in planning a TRAC program for recycling, Kistler said.

"I've always been interested in the environment, nature and the outdoors," Kistler said. The recycling program is estimated to have saved the hospital \$28,000.

"We've had a good cooperative effort on the recycling program," Kistler said, recalling how the 10 TRAC team members worked on an advertising campaign. TRAC proposals are submitted to a hospital management action council and if approved at that level, go to an executive vision council.

Not only has the recycling effort been cost-effective for the hospital, the dialysis unit of the West Central Ohio Kidney Foundation also has benefited. Funds from the sale of cardboard and aluminum placed in recycling bins go toward the kidney foundation's dialysis unit at the hospital.

A cartoon character created by Lima artist David S. Adams has helped spread the word on the recycling program, Kistler said. The character is called MEL, an acronym for Memorial's Environmental Leader.

"Mel says, 'Do this, do that,'" Kistler said. The cartoon character makes frequent appearances on the hospital's in-house video system.

But a TRAC idea doesn't always track, Rempfer said.

Rempfer originated what she calls a physician communication sheet through which a nurse's comments on patients could be relayed by writing comments on reports that go directly to a doctor.

"Communications can go astray and I saw the plan as a way for an associate to get a message across to the physician," Rempfer said.

Although the idea was tried, it didn't stick.

"A good thing about TRAC," Rempfer said, "is that you can have an idea and know that while in the long run it may not fly, at least it was tried."

"We see the hospital growing because of the teamwork program," Kistler said. "When the whole thing was started two years ago there was hesitancy on the part of some people to get involved, but we have seen some changes.

"The program has made life easier for a lot of people here."

"People from all areas have pulled together to help solve problems," Rempfer said. "The worker gets to see results and the part they played in them."

"It used to be that people would respond to a slogan or idea from management this way: 'Well, they are going to do such and such. I wish they would have asked me what I thought,'" Kistler said. "Now an associate can be part of a solution to a problem. TRAC has given the associate a pathway to being involved."