Workers: A new investment

By Andrea Knox
Inquirer Staff Writer

'Associates' who dig for new solutions

It is a classic win-win situation. Since spring, obstetrics nurses at Doylestown Hospital have worked 72 hours over every two-week period but have been paid for 80 hours — and saved the hospital money in the bargain.

The key is flexible scheduling. The nurses agreed to work when the ward was busy and take time off when they weren't needed. The result was a drop in costs for both overtime and unscheduled time off.

This was no flash from management. The nurses suggested it.

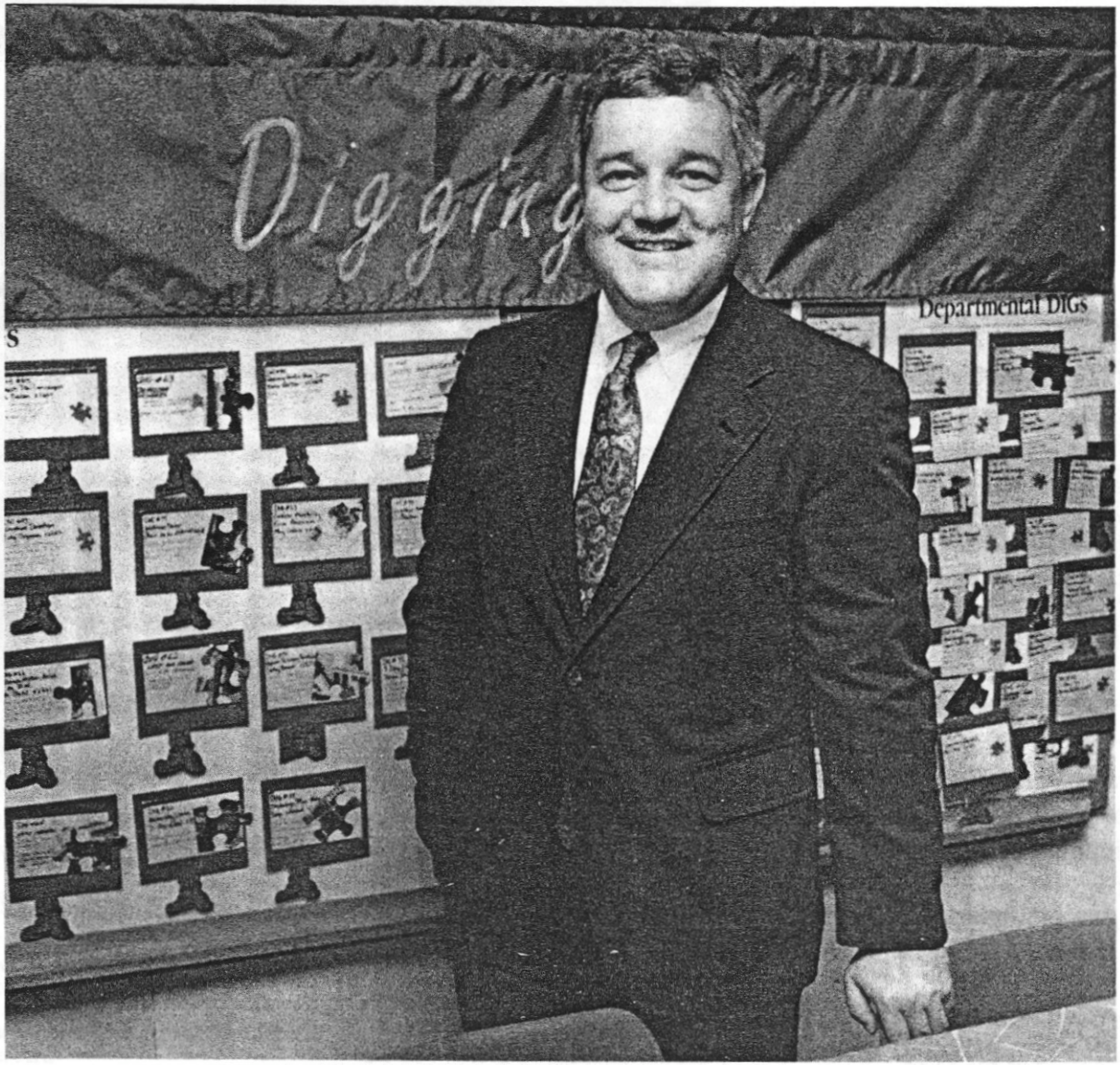
It is, says chief executive officer Richard A. Reif, an example of how employees often see problems, solutions and opportunities that escape management — though Reif himself would never call them *employees*.

Everyone who gets a paycheck from the hospital is known as an *associate*. In Reif's view, *employee* suggests subordination, while *associate* connotes a collegial approach to running the institution.

"We're all in this together," he says. "I'm just one person. We have 1,400" workers with good ideas.

Under a system called do-it groups, or DIGs, those who suggest improvements get to implement them — and each group that completes a project gets a $20 bill for refreshments at its final meeting.

Since August, 27 DIGs have completed their work, and 90 others have started.



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CEO Reif in the cafeteria at Doylestown Hospital, where employees' suggestions are posted.

The results range from the significant to the seemingly mundane:

- Rehabilitation patients spend less time waiting for van service, thanks to the efforts of a committee headed by the administrative director of rehabilitation.
- Coffee is available starting at 7:30 a.m. instead of 8 a.m., a boon for those who start work at 8. The change was conceived and executed by a secretary.
- There soon will be areas where people can sit near elevators, a suggestion from the assistant chaplain.
- The pharmacy staff is reorganizing storage of intravenous supplies.
- A groundskeeper is setting up a horticulture-therapy program for psychiatric patients.
- As a patient at the hospital, a staff member was bothered by the noise from medication carts in the hallways. She heads a group that is trying to make the carts quieter.
- The medical-records staff is developing a system to better track patients' charts as they move through the hospital, from bedside to nursing station to pharmacy to radiology and back again.

Reif's philosophy is that the hospital is a service organization and that the quality of service given by employees will depend on the extent to which they feel valued and trusted.

One of his first acts when he became CEO 18 months ago was a ceremonial smashing of the time clock, which was dropped to the ground by a construction crane before a crowd of employees.

"We don't trust our people?" he asks rhetorically.

Nurturing of the staff has taken many other forms.

This summer, the hospital ran a day camp for employees' children in first through fourth grades.

It recently instituted a flexible-benefits program, so each employee can choose the benefits he or she finds most useful.

Now, Reif has begun a salary restructuring to assure that jobs with equal work and responsibility command equal pay, and to be sure that the hospital's salaries are competitive.

But for many employees, the knowledge that their ideas and contributions are valued is one of the biggest boosts.

Medical technologist Linda Hoover, whose team at Doylestown Hospital is working on ways to make medicine carts quieter.

Three years ago, personnel recruiter Kathy Owens Fox proposed a summer day camp to introduce employees' children to the hospital. She saw it as an early step in recruiting, a way to raise kids' interest in health careers.

She was told, "It's not in your job description."

This year, when she raised the idea with Reif, "He just said, 'Do it!' " she recalls with wonderment.

The weeklong camp attracted 15 children ages 9 through 11. The project won an award from the Pennsylvania Hospital Association as the best low-budget public relations effort of the year.

The obstetrics nurses' work schedule also won an award from the hospital association.

"The American workforce has the willingness and the desire," says Reif. "They just have managers who don't let them."

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