Experience is no substitute for training

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

Problems, problems, problems. At times, it can feel as if the problems are going to take over your existence. If you’re fortunate to have a reasonably well-adjusted attitude about life and work, you’ve probably come to realize that problems are a fact of life and not all problems are bad. In fact, in dentistry, you make your living identifying and solving oral health problems for your patients. However, some problems can be far more draining than others, namely, dealing with the dreaded problem employee. Take this scenario:

The dentist has a vacancy to fill. She needs to hire a scheduling coordinator immediately. She wants someone with plenty of experience because there will be little time for training in her busy practice. A pleasant personality and nice demeanor are good qualities to have if they are part of the package, but the driving factor on the winning applicant’s scoring sheet will be experience. The resumes come in and in a matter of weeks, the dentist finds Cassandra. She definitely brings experience, having worked in two dental practices and a medical office in the past 10 years. Cassandra is it, and the dentist can’t wait to get her in the door and at the desk so that she can scratch this vacancy problem off the list. Slam, bang, another hire done, back to the important stuff—dentistry.

Eight weeks down the road more serious problems have taken over. The schedule is a disaster. No-shows have skyrocketed. On some days production comes to a screeching halt, other days the team is racing to fill available slots. Every day, the dentist and her assistant spend a significant amount of time filling in for workers who have disappeared or who have simply failed to show up on time. The question is, what caused all of this?

Cassandra had come from a practice in which the dentists were skilled at keeping patients on schedule. She was familiar with the practice’s recall system because her former employer used automated text messages and e-mail to confirm appointments. Yes, she had experienced the ground running! Dentists often think that just because the employee brings experience she/he will know exactly how to perform the job she/he is hired for, and according to the dentist’s preferred standards.

It doesn’t occur to the hiring dentist that the new employee cannot “hit the ground running” without some training, without a job description or without daily feedback and periodic performance reviews. Certainly, a more experienced new hire may pick up systems more quickly, but it doesn’t mean you show the experienced new hire the desk, the computer, the phone and the bathroom and expect her/him to perform as though she/he has been in your office for years.

Success is a step-by-step process

When a new employee is hired she/he must be given a clear job description that details the job responsibilities. Just because the new hire has worked in another dental practice before does not mean she/he will understand your office’s systems and procedures. This enables individual employees to better understand their specific role in the practice and how they fit into the overall success of the team.

In addition, new hires, as well as existing staff, need to be told what exactly they will be held accountable for and how their performance will be measured. Establish individual performance goals for each employee.

With input from the team member, establish individual goals that complement practice goals, such as increasing the collection ratio, improving accounts receivables, expanding production, reducing time to prepare treatment rooms and increasing clinical skills.

Next, there simply has to be a protocol for training the new employee and orienting her/him into the practice. Create a list of areas that the new employee must be educated on immediately as well as a list of those areas she/he should be exposed to during the coming months. Create a list of people who can hit the ground running right out the back door.

Give feedback early and often. Remember, the vast majority of employees want to know how they are doing and if they are meeting your expectations. Ongoing feedback is essential in helping to guide employees constructively, to help them solve problems, to direct them over obstacles, and most importantly, to encourage them. Feedback is what you give to employees publicly to recognize something they do well, and privately to redirect them if they are moving off course. It is ongoing; it doesn’t happen once a year or once every six months—that would be performance reviews.

Performance reviews are given on a schedule, typically at least twice a year, and more frequently with new staff. These provide opportunities to sit down one-on-one with individual team members and discuss their overall performance and their progress toward achieving their goals.

Performance reviews are one of the most effective tools in measuring employee success. Take steps to ensure your office has a formalized performance review process. At a minimum, appraise performance in these areas:

• Following instructions, cooperation, quality of work, initiative, innovation, time management, communication, and flexibility
• Work ethics
• Attitude
• General characteristics, e.g., professional appearance, verbal communication, ability to work under pressure, organization skills, ability to prioritize
• Attendance

Experience is certainly an excellent quality for any new hire to bring into the practice, but it’s no guarantee that the employee will succeed. Each new hire needs some measure of training, a new employee orientation to the practice and clear guidelines and direction from day one.

About the author

Sally McKenzie is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides success proven management services to dentists nationwide. In addition, the company offers a vast array of practice enrichment programs and team training. McKenzie is also the editor of an e-Management newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter sent complimentary to practices nation-wide. To subscribe, visit www.mckenzieziemgmt.com and www.thedentistsnetwork.net. She is also the publisher of the New Dentist magazine, www.thenewdentist.net. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at (877) 777-6151 or at sallymck@mckenzieziemgmt.com.