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 from dawn till dusk. And at least once a week the dentist or the hygienist is double-booked, sending everyone scrambling.

The dentist is about to have a meltdown and Cassandra is about to have a meltdown. That list of problems has grown tenfold. So what went wrong? This dentist was drawn to the position not just because the new hire 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 desktop, the computer, the phone and the bathroom and expect her/him to perform as though she/he has been in your office for years.

**Spell it out**

New hires need to understand your big picture. What are your goals for the practice and how does this employee’s responsibilities fit into achieving those goals? Explain it to the new hire. Just because the new hire has worked in another dental practice before does not mean she/he will understand your objectives, your desires and your preferred ways of doing things.

However, if you share your vision and goals, you help your new employee understand that she/he is not just another cog in your practice wheel. She/he is essential to the success of something much greater.

There is far more satisfaction in any job when specific goals are identified and utilized than merely going through the motions of just another day in just another practice. Everyone needs to know 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 expected to do during the coming months.

At a minimum, provide job-specific instruction to ensure that new employees are prepared to carry out their duties according to your specific expectations. In today’s dental marketplace, a wide variety of affordable educational options are available. It will save you from a whole host of major practice problems down the road and ensure that neither you nor your employee is ready to “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 skills, 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. Every new hire needs some measure of training, a new employee orientation to the practice and clear guidelines and direction from day one.

Sally McKenzie is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides support management services to dentists nationwide.

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**Dental Tribune** | **September 2009**