They stew, they fume, they leave ... What drives good employees away?

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

It’s one of the most frustrating and unpredictable situations dentists face. Everything is humming along just fine. The schedule is full. Production is solid. Collections are good, and treatment acceptance is even better. The team members have their moments, but overall appear to be functioning reasonably well.

Then, as they say, the other shoe drops.

Your long-term business employee — the one who is the expert on the computer systems, a master scheduler and overall great employee — hands in her two-weeks notice.

There’s no hiding your shock and disappointment. Why is she leaving? And how is it that you did not see it coming? What happened to trigger this?

The scenario is all too common in dental practices in every major city, small town and growing metropolis. Employee turnover is nothing new — in fact, it happens about every 18 months in most dental offices.

After the initial shock and feelings of betrayal subside, most dentists shrug their shoulders and resign themselves to the “good help is hard to keep” attitude.

As most of you know, it’s even harder to find good help. Estimates for replacing an employee range from $20,000 to 1.5 times the team member’s annual salary. In addition, when it comes to quality personnel, you’re losing far more than money when they walk out the door.

As McKenzie Management consultants have seen time and again, when dentists ignore problems, the good team members silently fume and eventually leave. They see that the clinician doesn’t address other employees’ negative behaviors. They become concerned, disappointed and angry. Eventually they just start looking for another job.

What’s more, in most practices, there’s no mechanism or process in place for employees to effectively share concerns or grievances.

Typically, most doctors or office managers mistakenly believe that if they claim the office has an “open door policy” they’ve done all that’s necessary to encourage employees to come forward with concerns. That’s not going to do it.

To keep good employees, team members need to know that if they have concerns or complaints, there are procedures in place in which they can voice their concerns and know that they will be addressed without fear of punishment.

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“Employee Concerns Policy.” This is a defined procedure in which employees complete a form that is available to them and give it to the dentist anonymously if they choose.

Rather than saying, “We have an open door policy,” the policy needs to say that the employee will be protected if he/she comes forward with a concern. There will not be any retaliation.

The dentist wants the employee to come forward so that they can discuss the issue. It may be as small a concern as how staff breaks are handled to the more serious issues, such as reporting harassment.

The most important aspect of this is that there is a section in which the employee writes down his/her concern and the dentist writes down the practice’s response to the employee’s concern. The employee knows that the problem will get a response, it won’t just be ignored.

One of the major benefits of a process such as this is that it enables the dentist or office manager to learn much more about what’s happening in the practice and among the team.

However, the greatest benefit is that both employees and the dentist genuinely appreciate the policy because it makes it much easier for the entire team to deal with problems as they arise.

Let’s face it, when it comes to dealing with concerns and problems, if you’re just making it up as you go along you are certainly going to face many more obstacles than if you have a policy in writing that you consistently follow.

Unfortunately, as virtually every dentist has learned, often the biggest practice problems are the walking, talking, breathing kind that you must work with day-after-day.

And that leads me to my next point: when you have problem employees, how do you deal with them? Read on.

**Turning up the heat before the fire**

In many practices, dentists do everything in their power to ignore problem employees as long as humanly possible. Oftentimes, the situation is not addressed until circumstances become so bad that it is affecting practice profitability.

Usually by the time it reaches this point, morale is in the cellar, employee and patient turnover has skyrocketed, and that problem employee isn’t just a problem anymore. He/she is a full-blown, raging disaster that is draining the life out of the practice.

At this point, the dentist can no longer hide in the patients’ mouths. So, he/she resolves to Google “progressive discipline plan” and start firing off those warning notices.

Moreover, that would be about the time that the problem employee hires an equally problematic attorney and starts laying the groundwork for a very long and expensive nightmare for the dentist and the practice.

Yes, it can and often does happen to small employers, even dentists. In the few practices that actually have employment policies, most have been pulled from some other business’ manual and are typically very punitive in nature. Essentially, they put the employee on the defensive before an issue even arises.

Equally troublesome is the fact that oftentimes employees don’t receive a complete policy handbook. They might get a list of do’s and don’ts, but the actual policy book is kept under lock and key in the dentist’s private office.

Sally McKenzie is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides 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 nationwide.

To subscribe, visit www.mckenziemgmt.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@mckenziemgmt.com.
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Every employee needs to have every policy in hand. The policy handbook the employee is given needs to be identical to the one the dentist has. In addition, those policies should be affirmative rather than punitive. For example, most progressive discipline policies are typically a series of “warnings” that do far more to derail the employment relationship than foster improvement in the employee’s behavior.

Everything says “Warning! Warning! Warning! We are going to impose this on you if you don’t change!” In most cases, all these warnings do is make the employee angry and create hostility toward the dentist.

An affirmative approach, however, treats employees as human beings and gives them the opportunity to take responsibility for their behavior. And what warnings don’t accomplish, oftentimes a conversation will.

It can be as simple as comments made in the office to the employee about his or her behavior. It can be time you schedule with the employee to go over a concern, but you don’t raise it in terms of “We’re giving you a verbal warning.” The primary goal of these “counseling sessions” is to exchange information.

The communication aspect is particularly important in situations in which a good employee begins to slip. Virtually every employer has seen an outstanding team member start to lose effectiveness. This is the time for dialogue, not progressive discipline.

You’ve invested tens of thousands of dollars in this long-term employee. You want to know what’s going on and you need to approach it in a manner that will put the employee at ease. Take the employee out of the office for coffee and have a conversation about what you’ve observed. Make this conversation as non-threatening as you can. While the conversation is noted in the employee’s file, nothing is given to the employee in writing.

However, if the employee’s behavior is disruptive to the practice, the dentist needs to have a more formal meeting with the employee. You will want something in writing at this point to outline behaviors that need to be corrected and what needs to be done.

Specifically state the behaviors and the actions the employee needs to take, but don’t refer to it as a warning.

The key is preparation. Waiting until employee behaviors are so problematic that they are damaging the practice, or dealing inconsistently with issues such as tardiness, family leave, unprofessional conduct, dress code, etc., make the dentist and practice highly vulnerable to litigation.

Instead of waiting until you reach the end of your rope, reach for your practice’s employment policy handbook instead.