Nurturing your staff

You’ve got to support team members in new roles if they’re to flourish. If you don’t, they might become unhappy, and at worst, leave the practice, warns Sharon Holmes

During the time I’ve been working for the Dental Arts Studio, I’ve found recruiting new team members a challenge. A team should be made up of different personalities, each with their own talent and potential.

If you have too many leaders, you have war. If you have too many followers, you have chaos. You can follow guidelines while conducting an interview and you can make a selection based on this, but this is only a guide and not a way to guarantee you’ll make the correct selection. Only once the new member joins the team, will you notice what their strengths and weaknesses are.

A tough call
Not long ago we decided to employ a third receptionist for Clapham Junction. The reception area here gets really busy with a full running practice, so an extra pair of hands was essential. At any given time there could be up to 14 patients in our waiting room.

One day I was in the practice, I noticed one of our receptionists shine. She was totally in control, even with phones ringing and patients waiting for attention at the desk. She maintained a smile; a pleasant tone of voice and nothing seemed to distress her. From this time onwards she had caught my eye.

I spoke to the operations coordinator at the practice that had interviewed her and she filled me in on her CV and employment history. I also asked the practice manager about her performance and she assured me she was brilliant at her job. This made me think two things. First, she might not stay long as she would want a more fulfilling role in the future – ambition cannot be placed in a box. Second, if I promoted her to practice manager level in one of our other branches, she might not enjoy the responsibility and I would lose her anyway.

As it happened, we were recruiting for a practice manager to take care of one of our branches. I approached Dr Malhan and Dr Solanki to offer her the position. They were just as concerned as me. In the past, we have moved staff into senior roles as they had proven fantastic and we have watched them become very stressed and unhappy. Just because someone may be brilliant at one role does not mean that they will be fantastic in the new more responsible role.

Practice management is a daily challenge and takes exceptionally strong leadership skills to take a practice forward. Corporate practices are even more of a challenge as there is usually no principal dentist on site.

Keeping in touch
I am very in touch with my staff and I easily notice their change of behaviour sooner than later. This allows me the opportunity to re-arrange their role to get them back to where they were before. I do this by talking to them regularly and letting them know there is nothing wrong with not enjoying more responsibility. You can either handle it or you can’t. It’s that simple. I’ve found that staff will rarely let you know they are unhappy. They would rather hand their notice in and leave, so they don’t feel as though they’ve failed. Before this happens, I step in and invite them to talk to me about their progress. Most important of all, I listen and try to meet their needs. Some staff are worth holding on to.

One of the most important aspects of promoting a member of staff into a more senior role is to make sure they receive enough training. You must make sure you follow up with them daily to see how they are getting along. You offer advice and support no matter how trivial it may seem to you. No question is too big or small. Remember: what is old hat to you is all new and frightening to them. There is no one else they can turn to on-site as the nurses have very little to do with the management of the practice.

Normally, it takes three months before the candidate is able to manage without your micro-management. If they fail, I have failed them. I give staff feedback at every opportunity, which they enjoy, especially when they finally get a task right.

Tending the young
This lesson I have only learned recently from past experience. You cannot promote someone to a more senior role and expect him or her to flourish. You have to tend to them like young seedlings. Believing in someone too much without giving him or her the training is not fair to the person you have offered this opportunity. Also though, you can only help someone grow if that is what they want as well. My mantra to my staff is: ‘All for one and one for all’.

As Winston Churchill once said: ‘Play the game for more than you can afford to lose, only then will you learn the game’.

About the author

Originally from South Africa, Sharon Holmes moved to the UK in 2002. She thoroughly enjoys her position as business development manager at the Dental Arts Studio and her role in the dental industry, which has moulded her into a winner in her field. She believes that her position is based on common sense.