Critical decisions are being made without input from those who are not part of the clique, or essential information is not shared with outsiders who need that information to effectively carry out their job responsibilities and duties, or if the treatment of some staff is noticeably different than the treatment of others.

Teams, not cliques, make a dental practice successful. While personalities, work styles, and interests may differ, each member of the staff needs to be given the opportunity to contribute fully.

It’s up to the dentists, as leaders, to set the example for the team and to steer clear of behaviors that can unwittingly strengthen cliques or create divisions among staff. For example, allowing a few to monopolize the conversation in staff meetings rather than insisting on input from all team members can convey the message to certain staff members that their input either isn’t valued or has a lower value than the ‘chosen’ participants.

Sharing information with a select few members of the team conveys to the rest that only the favored are ‘in the know.’ Also, socializing with certain members of the staff outside of work also conveys the message of favoritism and encourages a sense of exclusivity among those who see themselves as part of the doctor’s social circle.

These and similar behaviors do nothing to build a sense of camaraderie and teamwork. Rather, they usually underscore the ‘us vs. them’ mentality. The doctor must be the leader of all, not the friend of a few.

Pay attention to the lines of demarcation that may be drawn in your office and take steps to erase them promptly. Those quietly war- ring factions are chiseling away at your practice infrastructure and subtly undermining your every ef- fort to establish a practice that is built on excellence. Read on.

Out with the ‘in’ crowd

Cliques can be particularly challenging in practices lacking job descriptions and/or systems of employee accountability. Nat- ural, where there is a communal- ity among employees, alliances and friendships are likely to re- sult. But there’s a difference between friendships and factions. For clique issues:

• Critical decisions are being made or pushed by a select few and not all practice members are involved.
• Team members are complai- ning that their views don’t mat- ter, or they are shutting down and refusing to offer input.
• Information is not readily shared unless employees are directed to do so.
• Certain staff members are openly cool to others.
• Whisper campaigns seem to be more prevalent.
• Some employees openly ex- clude others in social or profes- sional activities.

If any of those rings true in your office, take these steps to unite and conquer:

• Recognize that individual person- alities can and do make a signifi- cant difference in how individuals react and interact with one another. Invest a small amount of time and resources in personality testing. Staff members who un- derstand the personalities of their colleagues, including the dentist, tend to work better prepared to work with them effectively. Employee online testing at www.mcken- ziemgmt.com/employeetest- ing.htm is an excellent tool to use.
• Clearly define job responsibili- ties. With job descriptions, all team members understand their individual roles on the team. Moreover, they recognize who is responsible and accountable for which systems.
• Hold regular staff meetings to address issues that arise in the practice. Dynamic teams are going to have disagreements. In fact, constructive conflict is essen- tial; it’s fundamental to growth and the pursuit of excel- lence. Encourage staff to work together to resolve issues and address matters that they feel should be addressed.
• Create an environment that en- courages teamwork. For exam- ple, if appointment confirmations are wreaking havoc on your day, dis- cuss the matter in a staff meeting and urge input and ideas from all staff members. Then assign two or three employees to develop a strategy to address the problem. Be sure that the ‘task force’ crosses any ‘clique lines’ that ap- pear to have been established.
• Insist that clear information be shared among the team. For ex- ample, hold a brief staff huddle each day to make sure that the front desk staff know exactly where to place emergency pa- tients to ensure there are no surprises. Give front desk staff needed forms, patient records, and any other procedures for which the doctor has been authorized.

Establish clear standards for of- fice behavior and policies and spell it out in an employee hand- book or policy manual. Then fol- low those policies. If you routinely make exceptions, you send the message that the policies are ir- relevant and everybody can sim- ply do their own thing without re- gard for how it will impact the pa- tients, the team and the practice.

Don’t look the other way. If an employee is engaging in nega- tive behaviors that are poten- tially damaging, don’t ignore it. Doing so implies that you ap- prove and further encourages a culture of distrust and division.

Reward teamwork and make an effort to acknowledge the success and positive contributions of every employee. Doing so will promote a team that not only appreciates working well together, but also enjoys succeeding together.

Finally, remember that al- though dental staffs are typically small in number, dental teams are often complex microcosms of the world in which we live. It’s not uncommon to have staff members with very different backgrounds, personalities, work styles, and backgrounds of your individual team members. Moreover, no team member will ever claim that every one of them has a clearly defined job description. That, along with solid practice management systems, will signifi- cantly reduce tensions among staff and fuel an environment of cohesion rather than division.