How to give feedback

As a practice manager, you must regularly inform your staff about their performance. Nikki Berryman explains why this is beneficial and how it can be done successfully.

Feedback is a powerful motivator. It is an indicator that the job we are doing is important, it is crucial for learning and development and it is one of the main tools in monitoring performance in ourselves and staff members. Feedback is essentially a way of conveying appropriate, significant information to others and to some degree is a trust-building exercise. It can also be a way of learning more about ourselves and others.

As a practice manager, you must regularly inform your staff about their performance. Whether they are performing well or need to do something better, giving feedback means acknowledging what was done.

A good manager will deliver both positive and negative feedback by:
- Being genuine, honest and open
- Being specific and direct
- By giving encouragement for improvement when feedback is necessary
- Genuinely listening to the response
- Giving time for reflection/discussion
- Being consistent.

Start with the positive
Always start with positive feedback, it makes people feel warm, motivated and encouraged and therefore more open to receive negative feedback (if necessary). Show and advise how to turn negative feedback into a positive result, this will give your team member a goal and something to work on rather than focusing too much on what they actually got wrong.

It is important to be very specific and to avoid generalisations, there needs to be as much detail as possible in order for the recipient to use this as a learning process. Make it clear that the feedback has come from you, for example, I thought that... This is especially important where negative feedback is concerned as it removes any thought of ‘being ganged up on’. We need to remember that the person to whom you are giving feedback must always be encouraged and given the opportunity to respond.

Negative feedback, if treated appropriately, can be a positive experience. Robert Heller (1998) stated: “If you only get positive feedback, it may well not be the whole truth.”

When to give feedback
Meetings can be used to give or receive generalised feedback as how to a system/technique may be working within the practice. Meetings should never be used to offer personal negative feedback. Daily management meetings – 20 to 30 minute sessions at the beginning of each day, to discuss the day ahead and give or receive feedback from the day before.

Team meetings (for example, weekly) – individual teams can organise and run these between themselves. Excellent for improving communication levels between staff members. Sometimes allow people to become more expressive and confident where they wouldn’t normally due to ‘managerial’ presence.

Appraisal – these can used to give feedback as a whole, i.e. how someone is developing within the practice. This is the most commonly used way of giving feedback, but practice managers must ensure that the yearly appraisal is not the only time that feedback is given.

One-to-one – private one-to-one sessions should always be used for negative feedback. Positive feedback is also better given in this kind of situation, there are no distractions and people will be able to take in what is being said to use as a learning tool.

End of day – for example, ‘Thanks for coping well with a difficult day’ – simple feedback for a job well done.

Coaching and mentoring – the coach/mentor will be expected to give feedback. Assign each staff member a mentor. This does not necessarily need to be someone who is ‘above’ them in the practice hierarchy. It is about having someone to communicate with, to discuss ideas with, to get feedback from.

Coaching sessions – in a business where innovation is built into the culture, coaching is an ongoing process. Coaching sessions with a peer (from inside or outside the business) can provide improved communication and positive feedback.

Points to note
- Feedback must be acceptable and useable
- Focus on the ‘here and now’
- Always start with positive feedback
- Feedback should be delivered in a positive way
- Be specific
- Feedback sessions should be held in an atmosphere of sensitivity and support

How to feed back
- Share ideas – do not lecture with advice
- Learn to listen
- Both positive and negative feedback should be delivered in a positive way
- Be specific
- Feedback sessions should be held in an atmosphere of sensitivity and support

The golden rule is: how can you expect your team members change, develop or improve their performance if, as their manager, are not giving regular feedback?

This article is an extract from one to be published in the Autumn 2009 issue of Dental Management, which is sent free to all members of the British Dental Practice Managers’ Association. The BDPMA is the essential forum for dental practice managers and organises seminars on all aspects of practice management. For more information telephone the BDPMA at 01452 888364 or visit www.bdpma.org.uk

About the author
Nikki Berryman is BDPMA membership co-ordinator and practice manager for past 10 years of Pure Dental Health and Wellbeing Centre in Trow, Cornwall. She is also a qualified dental nurse, has a diploma in dental practice management (DiplDPM) and a diploma in management (DiplManmgt). She has been married to Paul for 14 years and she enjoys running, hiking, cricket (watching, not playing), cooking and spending time with friends on the beach.