Prepare for the fire and you'll be spared the burn

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

A few months back a major American company in the pharmaceutical business announced an 8% reduction in force. The surge of publicity wasn’t because it had just made some noteworthy efforts to reduce its size and impact on the world of commerce, or because it had achieved record profits, or because it had given a large donation to a needy organization. No, this company was in the news for the manner in which it handled that least favorite of all exchanges between management and employees—the firing. Instead of face-to-face dismissals, the human resources department sent email notices out to those whose jobs were being eliminated, sparking a world-wide reduction in force. Needless to say, management and employee relations consultants weren’t exactly holding this up as an example of how to deal with the dismissal dirty work.

Admittedly, the thought of letting electronic communication tools handle this potentially ugly task has at least some level of appeal, particularly for those who dislike confrontation, which would encompass a large percentage of dentists. It’s fair to say that employee dismissals is the most anxiety ridden of all practice management responsibilities, and many doctors will tolerate considerable interpersonal pain and suffering, deleterious effects on the team at large, and outright mistrust just to dodge it.

I recommend that you avoid firing employees by email, but if that’s what you choose, it’s unpleasant or difficult. Dealing with thorny HR issues is simply not something anyone relishes, but it is a practice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn’t mean you have to go looking for trouble either.

In fact, if you implement a few common sense human resources strategies, you’ll make a significant strides in reducing the number and level of employee headaches you’ll have to face.

Start with the hiring process. Plan carefully and take your time. Certainly, a staff opening creates temporary stress on everyone, but the consequences of a poor hire can crush a team and cause serious headaches, on a practice. No matter how urgent your need for quality help might be, don’t be hasty. One poor hire can take months to fix.

A few tips: first, make sure you’ve got someone in the position and the rest will work itself out. The direct expense of a poor hire is at least 1.5 times her/his annual salary, and the resulting stress, anxiety, and inefficiency make it one of the most costly mistakes in dental practice. Take steps to hire the right person for your team, not just fill an opening.

Place ads for new hires in those dental journals and websites that will attract the type of employee you’re seeking. For example, in addition to advertising in the local paper, consider area newsletters geared toward dental assistants, hygienists, and if you’re hiring new staff, target your ads in management newsletters, such as Women in Management.

Plan and prepare for your interviews. Ask the same questions to all candidates to ensure you can compare their responses.

1. Provide clear job descriptions to your applicants, so they know exactly what is expected of them.

2. Train new employees. Some doctors begin with an oral warning, proceed to a written warning, and document every step in the process.

3. Give the employee some form of personnel policy manual. This document spells out the office code of conduct, dress codes, policies regarding tardiness, overtime, sick leave, office policies and procedures. All employees deserve to know the rules of the game and what they need to do to continue playing.

4. Give the director and constructive feedback, often. Too many practices wait until there’s a problem or crisis before they give a new hire any feedback, an employee begins long before you’re ready to escort her/him out of the building, but this troublesome exercise need not be your human resources burden, but rather should bear alone. I recommend that you let problem employees dismiss themselves.

Unless the employee’s behavior is so egregious that you are forced to take immediate action, the team member should be given the opportunity to improve her/his performance over a 60-90 day period. But don’t just call them aside and encourage them to try a little harder. Explain to the employee verbally and in writing the specific issues that are not satisfactory and document exactly what needs to change in the employee’s performance.

With the employee, develop an agreement that spells out what she/he needs to do to improve her/his performance. It should be in writing, signed by both doctor and employee and placed in the employee’s file. Monitor the staff member’s progress, give regular feedback, and document every step in the process. If the team member is violating established practice policies, such as coming in late, leaving early, disregarding patient protocols, etc., reprimand them with an Employee Warning Notice or similar document. The warning notice states specifically the type of violation committed. It also should include an area for the employee to acknowledge or deny the incident and provide her/his version of what transpired. The notice also should specifically state the type of disciplinary action that the practice will take—warning, suspension, termination, or other. In addition, it prescribes what the consequences should be the incident happen again. And, finally, it includes a signature line where the employees signs, confirming that they fully understand the notice, its purpose, and the repercussions.

Ideally, at the end of this 60-90 day progressive discipline plan the employee has had the opportunity to see the errors of her/his ways, make the necessary steps to improve, the proven, and every lives and works happily ever after. Unfortunately, the fairytale ending seldom occurs.

Time to let go

Many dental practices do everything they can to help the employee become an effective member of the team only to be forced into eventually terminating the individual.

Oftentimes, the primary reason for which an dentist wishes to dismiss an employee is poor performance, which is not the dentist’s decision to terminate the employee, rather it’s the employee’s choice to fail to correct the problem. Now is the time to escort them to the door, but even this should be carefully considered.

When the employee sees the documentation and when they understand the progressive discipline policies, they cannot deny that they are responsible for their actions and the consequences. It’s isn’t the dentist’s decision to terminate the employee, rather it’s the employee’s choice to fail to correct the problem. Now is the time to escort them to the door, but even this should be carefully considered.

Never dismiss an employee when you are angry. Prepare for the fire and spare yourself a nasty burn. Here’s how:

1. Tell the employee that the purpose of the meeting is to release them from their position.

2. Don’t go into the details of the performance problems.

3. Through the progressive discipline procedures, the employee has been provided numerous opportunities over the past 60-90 days to understand and address the performance issues.

4. Give the employee a check on the spot for earned salary and benefits or tell them to expect payment within a certain number of days.

5. The person then should be escorted to collect their personal belongings and sign the discharge form.

6. When the employee is gone, call the team together and inform them that the employee is no longer with the practice.

Although firing an employee is something extraordinarily difficult for most people, once the step is taken most dentists find that it was the best thing they could have done for both themselves and the practice, and, typically, it was long overdue.

About the author

Sally McKenzie, Certified Management Consultant, is the founder and owner of McKenzie Management, which provides highly successful and proven management services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Management offers a full line of educational and management products, which are available on its website, www.mckenziemgmt.com. In addition, the company offers a vast array of Practice Enrichment Programs and team training. Ms. McKenzie is the editor of the e-Management newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter sent complimentary to practices nationwide. To subscribe visit www.mckenziemgmt.com or send an email to info@dentistnetwork.net. Ms. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at 877-777-8414 or at Sally.mckenzie@mckenziemgmt.com.