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

By Sally McKenzie, CMCA

A few months back a major American company had a serious personnel problem. The surge of publicity wasn't because it had just made some note-worthy acquisition, or that it was recognized in 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, arranged a huge conference call, and wreaked serious havoc on a wide reduction in force. Needless to say, management guru and entrepreneur turned family therapists 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 in disdains 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 too but not because it's unpleasant or difficult. Dealing with theory HR issues is simply the better management practice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn't mean you should have to look to go planning for staff trouble.

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 spill over to everyone, on and off practice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn't mean you have to go looking for staff trouble.

Place ads for new hires in those professional and online sites 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 employees, 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.

Make use of online employee testing tools available to dentists and test your top two or three applicants. These testing tools measure employee skills based on clear data. One applicant may be very strong in certain areas but lack necessary abilities that are critical to the position you seek to fill. Another person may seem to have the right personality for the job, but with a different aptitude test he or she may have the right answers. With the employee, develop an agreement that spells out what he/she needs to do to prove 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.

If the team member is violating established practice policies, the person then should be escorted to consult their personal and practice policies, and test your top two or three applicants. These testing tools measure employee skills based on clear data. One applicant may be very strong in certain areas but lack necessary abilities that are critical to the position you seek to fill. Another person may seem to have the right personality for the job, but with a different aptitude test he or she may have the right answers. With the employee, develop an agreement that spells out what he/she needs to do to prove 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 he/she needs to do to prove 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.

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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 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 extract them to the door, but even this should be carefully planned.

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

Patients should not be in the office or expected in the office when an employee is being terminated.

Meet with the employee in private but have a witness present—such as your attorney, office manager, or spouse.

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

Don't go into the details of the performance problems.

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

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.

The person then should be escorted to collect their personal and practice tools, safes, and hand over the office key.

When the employee is gone, make a list of all information and tools they left behind and inform them that the employee is no longer with the practice. Do not get into any details regarding the dismissal. It's important that the team hear from the doctor as soon as possible to avoid speculation and gossip.

Although firing an employee is something extraordinarily difficult for most, if the right 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.