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

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

A few months back a major American company was considering a move to a new location. The surge of publicity wasn’t because it had just made some noteworthy on-the-record statements about the future 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, and those who were spared had the email notice on their desk. It was a wide reduction in force. Needless to say, management gurus and consultants were峭还在 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 misery just to dodge it.

I recommend that you avoid firing employees by phone. It’s unpleasant or difficult. Dealing with thorny HR issues is simply not something to do over the phone. I don’t care whether you like it or not. I’m sure that doesn’t mean you have to go looking for staff trouble.

In fact, if you implement a few common-sense human resource strategies, you’ll make a significant stride 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 spark huge headaches on a practice, whether you like it or not. Moreover, that doesn’t mean you have to get someone in the position and the rest will work itself out. The direct expense of a poor hire is at least 1.5 times his/her annual salary, and the resulting stress, anxiety and practice inefficiency can make it one of the most costly mistakes you can make. Take steps to hire the right person for your team, not just fill an opening.

Place ads for new hires in those dental and practice-oriented 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 train new employees, some of your efforts will pay off.

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 office, you want to know which applicant is suited for both the position and the practice.

Once you’ve hired the best applicant, take these steps to help them succeed:

1. Provide clear job descriptions to employees, so they know exactly what is expected of them.
2. Train new employees. Some of your efforts will pay off.
3. Give the employee some form of personnel policy manual. This document spells out the office code of conduct, dress code, policies regarding tardiness, overtime, sick leave, office policies and procedures.
4. Allow employees to review the rules of the game and what they need to do to continue practicing.
5. Give detailed and constructive feedback often. Too many practices wait until there’s a problem or crisis before they give a new hire any feedback.

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Practice Matters

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About the author

Sally McKenzie,
Certified Management Consultant
Consultant and author. She is CEO 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 Dentists’ Network newsletter, which is complimentary to practices nationwide. To subscribe visit www.mckenziemgmt.com or www.dentistsnetwork.net. Ms. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at 877-777-8514 or at sally.mckenzie@mcgmt.com.