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

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

A few months back a major American company announced an across-the-board cut. The surce of public ur wasn’t because it had just made some notable deals, acquisition of a worldwide market, 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 the notices were clear and short. The dismissal force was a wide reduction in need. Needless to say, management and employees weren’t exactly holding this up as an example of how to deal with the dismissal dirty work.

Admittedly, the thought of letting electronic communica tion 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 dismissal is the most anxiety ridden of all prac tice 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 but if you can’t, it’s unpleasant or difficult. Dealing with thorny HR issues is simply something you have to do as a prac tice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn’t mean you have to go looking for staff troubles. 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 create serious havoc, on a practice. No matter how urgent you feel your situation is, do not let your need for staff drive you 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 ineffi ciency make it one of the most costly mistakes you can make. Take steps to hire the right per son for your team, not just fill an opening.

Place ads for new hires in those dental journals 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 den tal assistants, hygienists. And if you train new employees, target your ads in management newsletters, such as Women in Management. Plan and prepare for your in terviews. Ask the same questions to all candidates to ensure you can compare their responses.

• Be specific. Don’t candy-coat the feedback and don’t beat around the bush. Tell employees what they are doing well and what needs to be corrected.
• Know when to cut your losses. Progressive discipline

In some cases, regardless of efforts to help an employee suc ceed, it simply doesn’t work out and dismissal is inevitable. How ever, the process of terminating

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 add ition, it prescribes what the consequences are should the inci dent happen again. And, finally, it includes a signature line where the employee signs, confirming that they fully understand the no tice, its purpose, and the repercuss ions.

Ideally, at the end of this 60-90 day progressive discipline plan, the employee has had the oppor tunity to see the errors of her/his ways, make the necessary changes, the Team members and employees 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 terminat ing the individual.

Oftentimes, the primary rea son is poor attitude, which man ifests itself in a refusal to perform up to the practice’s standards or negativity that drags down the entire team. In other cases, the employee’s skills are weak and could be improved, but they won’t take the necessary steps to become a more effective member of the team. Or they make a half-hearted effort in which they will improve for a while then slip right back into their old ways. The penalties become stronger if the employee misconduct or poor performance is repeated. For ex ample, it may start with an oral warning, proceed to a written warning, then suspension, and ultimately termination.

When the employee sees the documentation and when they understand the progressive dis cipline policies, they cannot deny that they are responsible for their actions and the consequences. It’s not the dentists’ 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 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 of fice or expected in the office when an employee is being term inated.

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

Tell the employee that the pur pose of the meeting is to release her/him from her/his position.

Don’t go into the details of the performance problems. Through the progressive dis cipline procedures, the em ployee has been provided nu merous 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 num ber of days.

The person then should be ex corted to collect their personal property and hand over the office key.

When the employee is gone, call the HR department and inform them that the employee is no longer with the practice. Do not get into any details re garding the dismissal. It’s im portant that the team hear from the doctor as soon as possible to avoid speculation and gossip.

Although firing an employee is something extraordinarily diff icult for most doctors, the first step is taken most dentists find that it was the best thing they could have done for both them selves and the practice, and, typ ically, it was long overdue.

About the author

Sally McKenzie, Certified Management Consul tant, is the owner and author. She is CEO of McKenze Management, which provides highly successful and proven man age ment services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Managem ent offers a full line of edu cational and management pro ducts, which are available on its website, www.mckenzemgmt.com. In addition, the company offers a vast array of Practice Enrichment Programs and team training. Ms. McKenzie is the editor of the e-Newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter and supporting publications to practices nationwide. To subscribe, visit www.dentistsnetwork.net. Ms. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at 877-777-6151 or at sally@mckenzemgmt.com.