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

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

A few months back a major American company fired a vice president, a position that has caused much consternation 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, a sure sign of a wide reduction in force. Needless to say, management and employees alike 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 without the wherewithal to confront 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 email unless it’s unpleasant or difficult. Dealing with thorny HR issues is simply too emotional a matter for prac- tice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn’t mean you have to go looking 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 proce- dure. 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 avaricious hazards, on a practice. No matter how urgent you feel your situation is, do not tell yourself that you need 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 her/his annual salary, and the resulting stress, anxiety, and practice inefficien- cy make it one of the most cost-ly mistakes a dentist 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 industry publications 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, some- times they do what they’re told well and what needs to be cor- rected.

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3. Give the employee some form of personnel policy manual. This document spells out the office code of conduct, dress code, policies regarding tard- iness, overtime, sick leave, office policies and procedures. All employees are due to receive a copy when they enter the practice. Let the staff know what to do in case of an emergency. Take steps to hire the right per- son for your team, not just fill an opening.

4. Provide clear job descriptions to employees, so they know exactly what is expected of them.

5. Be specific. Don’t candy-coat the feedback and don’t beat around the bush. Tell employees what they’re doing well and what needs to be cor- rected.

6. When to cut your losses. Progression 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 incidents and provide her/his version of what tran- spired. The notice also should specifically state the type of disci- plinary action that the practice will take—warning, suspension, termination, or other. In addi- tion, it prescribes what the con- sequences 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 reper- cussions.

Ideally, at the end of this 60-90 day progression discipline plan, the employee has had the oppor- tunity to see the errors of her/his ways, make the necessary changes, the prove her/his performance over time. Certainly, a staff open- iness. 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 avaricious hazards, on a practice. No matter how urgent you feel your situation is, do not tell yourself that you need 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 her/his annual salary, and the resulting stress, anxiety, and practice inefficien- cy make it one of the most cost-ly mistakes a dentist can make. Take steps to hire the right per- son for your team, not just fill an opening.

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employee and placed in the employee becomes an effective member of the team only to be forced into eventually terminat- ing the individual.

Sometimes, the primary rea- son is a poor attitude, which man- ifests itself in a refusal to perform up to the practice’s standards or negativism 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 exam- ple, 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 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 exert them to the door, but even this should be carefully planned.

Never dismiss an employee when you are angry. Prepare for the fire and you’ll be spared the burn.

Tell the employee that the pur- pose of the meeting is to release them from their 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 chance to explain his position.

Give the employee 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 es- courted to collect their personal items and pass along the office key.

When the employee is gone, call the team together 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 gurus, since 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 and Management author and she. She is CEO of McKen- nie Management, which provides highly successful and proven man- agement services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Man- agement offers a full line of edu- cational and management pro- ducts, which are available on its website. www.mckenniegmt.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 and complimentary to practices nationwide. To subscribe visit www.mckenniegmt.com or www.dentistnetwork.net. Ms. McKen- nie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at 877-777-8451 or at saley.mckenniegmt.com.

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