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

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

A few months back a major American company started airing commercials on television. The surge of publicity wasn't because it had just made some noteworthy contributions to 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. In stead of face-to-face dismissals, the human resources department sent email notices out to those whose jobs were being eliminated, sparking a major uproar in the office, a wide reduction in force. Needless to say, management gurus and human resources specialists 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 medium-sized enterprises 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 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, as it's unpleasant or difficult. Dealing with thorny HR issues is simply not manageable by phone prac- tice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn't mean you have to go looking for trouble staff.

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 erode your business home, on a practice. No matter how urgent you feel your situation is, do not hire someone without trying 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 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 newspapers 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.

1. Provide clear job descriptions to employees, so they know exactly what is expected of them.
2. Train new employees. Some- one needs to help this person with the dismissal dirty work.
3. Train your employees. Some- one needs to help this person with the dismissal dirty work.
4. Give direction and construc- tive feedback, often. Too many practices wait until there's a problem or crisis before they give a new hire any feedback.
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 corrected.
6. 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 an employee begins long before you're ready to escort her/him out of the building, but this trou- blesome exercise need not be your human resources burden to bear alone. I recommend that you let problem employees dis- miss themselves.

Unless the employee's be- havior is so egregious that you are forced to take immediate ac- tion, the team member should be given the opportunity to im- 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. Ex- plain 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 per- formance.

With the employee, develop an agreement that spells out what she/he needs to do to improve 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 violat- ing established practice policies, such as coming in late, leaving early, disregarding patient pro- tocols, you can issue 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 tran- spired. The notice also should specifically state the type of discipli- nary 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 noti- ce, its purpose, and the reper- cussions.

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 steps, the provements, and everyone lives and works happily ever after. Un- fortunately, 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 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. With progressive discipline, the penalties become stronger should the employee misconduct or poor performance be 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 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 planned.

Never dismiss an employee when you are angry. Prepare for the fire and you'll be spared the burn. Here's how:

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 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- collated to collect their personal property and hand over the office key.

When the employee is gone, call all team members 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 dif- ficult for most people, 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.