Improving practice performance

Amanda Atkin explains how to achieve excellent teamwork

You cannot put a price or value on the factors that drive team performance. This is because most people remain with an employer because of the quality of life and satisfaction they derive from being part a rewarding and balanced working environment. Great dental practices owners recognise these attributes as ‘x’ factors of the business world and work to improve them.

Such factors include:

- **Motivation** – every dental team member is unique; therefore the motivation to perform better will be different for each person. You should identify what motivates each team member and provide opportunities that encourage their interest and performance.

- **Setting goals** – make sure you have a vision for how you want your practice to operate now and in the future. Communicate your vision to the team so that they are directing their energies toward a common goal. They will feel they are truly a part of the practice and this will enhance their performance.

- **Praise** – take advantage of large and small opportunities to praise your team for work well done. Your recognition of their good performance means a lot and it is important that you acknowledge their efforts.

- **Feedback** – be lavish with praise but selfish with criticism. Offer constructive feedback that makes your team feel respected and valued.

- **Management** – be available as a resource to your team. They should feel comfortable to approach you with questions and concerns and not feel as if they are imposing on your time. They should be able to depend upon you for guidance and as a model of what excellent performance is all about.

Don’t underestimate the value of having regular, well-run team meetings. These can pro-

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 vide the ideal opportunity to:

- Identify the risks of poor performance by individuals or the team
- Discuss the value and benefits of an open and accountable working environment
- Make everyone feel comfortable and confident about raising concerns to do with patient safety or other risks
- Commit to dealing with concerns fairly and professionally and protecting those who raise a genuine concern
- Understand the importance of a ‘safety valve’ when the usual channels of communications do not work, for whatever reason

Whatever the size of your practice team, it is unlikely that everyone will perform at his or her best all of the time. Frequently, below par performance will be brought to the attention of the practice manager or practice principal by another member of the team. If a practice team member raises a genuine concern about the performance of a colleague, they should be supported and protected from adverse consequences or reprisals.

For junior members especially, it is a brave step to confront such issues and they must know they are not at risk of losing their job. If they act in good faith, it should not matter if they are mistaken or if there is an innocent explanation for their concern. However, if someone maliciously makes an accusation known to be untrue, disciplinary action should be taken.

It is in the interests of all practices that concerns can be raised openly and dealt with fairly and professionally. Concerns may be raised verbally or in writing and the latter will sometimes be anonymous. Anonymous concerns can be difficult to investigate and it is impossible to protect the person who raised the concern and provide them with feedback.

The relevant individual(s) should be interviewed to assess what action, if any, should be taken. This could result in an informal review of their performance or a more detailed investigation of the circumstances that led to the concern being raised. It is imperative that a record is kept of each stage of the investigation and that individuals are given as much feedback as possible, as and when appropriate.

Where poor performance is identified and personal development may be needed, an appraisal interview should be conducted. This is a positive process and is not part of a disciplinary procedure. However, areas where the employ-
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Identify what motivates each team member and provide opportunities that encourage their interest and performance.

Some performance review systems use ratings, rankings or descriptions of performance. These are almost always subjective and so open to bias and their motivational effect is limited. Some systems use a narrative summary of the employee’s overall contribution — which gives a more balanced view.

In many systems employees are set objectives and their achievements in relation to these objectives are used to judge performance. Where pay is linked to performance, ratings are used to determine the salary increase to be awarded but this can devalue the performance management system.

Developing a performance review system

In developing a performance review system you will need to carry out the following:

- Identify your overall objectives – an outline of what you want your practice to achieve in the year ahead and beyond
- Prepare individual job descriptions, and agree these with the staff
- Define the skills and knowledge (competences) that each job requires and the expected level of performance then link these to your objectives
- Discuss and agree a personal development plan with each member of staff
- Decide on the ways that continuous feedback should be given and whether regular meetings are needed in addition to an annual review of performance

Supporting your dental team is one of the key factors in running a successful practice. A highly motivated team that performs well day in and day out will also make your life much easier.