

Establish a Staff Culture of Success

The success of you and your practice depends on staff. Nurture the right attitudes and behaviors.

By Allan Walker

The success of you and your practice begins and ends with your staff. Even if you are the best doctor in your market, you will only be as good as your staff allows you to be. A motivated, happy staff can help take you to the top of your profession, whereas a dysfunctional, malcontent support team can spell economic and professional disaster.

Every doctor seeks to hire only the best employees (who arrive at work with a smile on their faces and an eager, can-do attitude). While every effort should be made to discover the best employees available during your search, it is important to understand that your staff ultimately will be a blend of unique characters and personalities. Your job is to sculpt them into a team that breeds and perpetuates a culture of success.

Success Tips

Your staff will become a direct reflection of you over time. That can be good or bad. If you are a gruff, nervous leader, your staff eventually will reflect those traits. If you are a mellow, easy-going leader, your staff ultimately will adopt that approach. Likely neither of those extremes is precisely how you want your staff to be viewed by management, co-workers, or patients.

You want to develop a culture of success in your practice that maximizes and accentuates the best traits of each member of your staff while minimizing individual flaws. To help your staff (and your practice) “be the best it can be,” your practice’s culture of success should be built on the following principles:

Accentuate the positive. Everyone is happier working in a positive, encouraging atmosphere. As the leader, adopt the “high-road” approach and watch your people grow, both individually and professionally. A positive work environment, where success is acknowledged and rewarded, means employees will look forward to coming to work, wear a smile, and gladly go the extra mile. Conversely, a consistently strained, negative, or tense work environment breeds dissatis-

faction, complacency and, ultimately, failure.

Be inclusive. Embrace all staff members, not just your personal favorites or none at all. The real world dictates you will like certain staff members more than others, but playing favorites is a surefire way to create hostility and resentment among staff that can fester and dramatically impact individual and group performance. This is especially true when favoritism is obvious yet not based on obvious performance or results. If you treat someone differently based on “insider” knowledge, understand that others who do not have access to that information will see things differently. This can have a direct impact on team morale.

Encourage mentoring. Learning and growth are critical to the sustained wellbeing of any staff. This is especially true in a challenging business climate that requires everyone to do more with less. Make sure you take full advantage of your more experienced employees, who can provide valuable knowledge and guidance to newer staff members. You do not have to set up a formal mentor program, but taking advantage of your hard-earned knowledge base certainly makes sense, especially when formal training time is expensive and time-consuming. A mentor culture is a win-win for everyone: those serving as mentors are delighted to be recognized as able to contribute in a unique way, while employees enjoy receiving “special” attention from a respected, established member of the team who affords them the opportunity to expand their own knowledge base and develop new skills.

Know your employees professionally. It’s perfectly fine to develop professional relationships with your employees. In fact, it is encouraged. Your goal should not be to become great friends with everyone; rather, you want to gain an understanding as to what inspires and motivates them to perform their best and, conversely, what “shuts them down.” You want to gain an understanding of what makes each staff member “tick.” While it is up to individual staff members to

learn to live and work within the sound business climate you have established in your practice, it is important that management at least try to uncover how each employee reacts and deals with stress, pressure, praise, challenge, etc. Not everyone responds to internal and external stimuli in the same way. Having a clear understanding of individual staff members' professional needs and style can make for a more even-keeled and success-oriented work environment.

Share information. People are scared today—they know they could be fired tomorrow and face an uncertain future without a steady paycheck or insurance coverage. Take an occasional moment to put your employees at ease, as best you can. While it is difficult to know exactly what the future holds, give your employees some sense of stability and confidence by painting an honest “state of the practice” picture. You need not divulge specific personal or financial information, but staff will appreciate periodic updates that are candid and realistic. This is a great opportunity to share your vision for the practice and demonstrate that you are engaged in strategic planning for the future.

Encourage teamwork. While each staff member should have a well-defined job description that spells out specific duties and responsibilities, encourage teamwork within the practice. When appropriate, try to assign teams comprised of staff that might not normally work together. Not only will this enhance camaraderie and help build a shared feeling that everyone is working toward the same goal, you may discover previously undiscovered strengths in combinations of team members working together. Be careful not to isolate individuals or small teams, especially if they have some “stand-alone” position or talent. As a leader, spend time with everyone on your staff, and try to make sure that each person feels like part of the team.

Lead by example. If you want a happy, well-functioning, and dedicated staff, you need to personally display the traits and characteristics you want staff to emulate. Be transparent in your actions and style. Hone your management and communications skills to reflect your needs and those of your staff and practice. Let staff clearly understand that you value and reward results-based and moral-based qualities such as integrity, ethics, hard work, honesty, positive attitude, cre-

ativity, teamwork, self-motivation, goal setting, etc. Exemplify the image you want for your practice to help staff see how they should act and function.

Be visible. You need to be a doctor first and foremost. You are the practice moneymaker, and you need to efficiently spend a vast majority of your time with patients, engaging in revenue-generating activities. However, it is important that you mingle with staff and acknowledge your team on a regular basis. Don't hide in your office or develop a work pattern that limits your personal interaction to just a few, select staff members. Taking an occasional trip around the office to say “hello” 1.) shows you care; 2.) brightens your employees' day; and 3.) keeps staff on their toes. It certainly does not hurt productivity when your staff knows “the boss” might drop in unexpectedly.

Encourage thoughtful communication. How staff members communicate—from top to bottom—is critical to building and maintaining a healthy work environment. Whether via e-mail, voicemail, face-to-face conversation, or “sticky note,” thoughtful and considerate communication is the groundwork for respect. Don't let one person be a rude or moody communicator. When you see an unhealthy communication taking place, address the issue quietly with that individual, and follow up with a team-wide directive, if necessary. Today's harried work setting demands that doctors and managers closely monitor all communication and provide direction and training when required.

Celebrate. Times are tough, but there is a great deal for which to be thankful—you are practicing your calling, you and your staff have meaningful employment, and your patients need you. Take a moment out of your busy schedule to gather the troops and enjoy yourself. You can celebrate a practice success or milestone or celebrate as a team for no reason at all.

Workplace Foundation

Every member of the team is grateful to be gainfully employed and wants to play a meaningful role in the ongoing success of the practice. Regard your team with the same feelings of esteem. Take time to develop a workplace foundation based on respect, training, and communication to maximize staff growth and employee satisfaction. ■