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# Employee engagement: Communicating clear expectations



*Gay Lowry*

**P**rior to my visits to client's practices and at continuing education events regarding employee engagement, I have noticed that there are several consistent messages coming from doctors. The top three concerns are as follows: first, employees do not listen; second, that they follow new procedures for only a short time and then revert to old habits or behaviors; and lastly, they ignore established policies and procedures. Planning to address these concerns in one of my lectures, attendees were asked in advance to rate their employee's level of morale and enthusiasm. The options for rating were low, moderate, or high. The results were interesting. In total, 29% of respondents reported a high level of morale while 59% of them reported a high level of enthusiasm. When questioned about the disparity between morale and enthusiasm, the respondents agreed that their responses were obviously in conflict with the reality of employee satisfaction and engagement in the practice.

In 1949, Lawrence Lindahl published the results of a survey in personnel magazine that reflected the factors most important to employee satisfaction. In preparation for a dental CE course I was giving in early 2105, I tested Mr. Lindahl's findings. The responses I received mirrored those in his study in that the most important issues for employees were a feeling of appreciation from their employers for their work; and feeling like they were "in" on things. Tactful disciplining, job security, and fair compensation came in third, fourth, and fifth. When contrasted to what employers believed were the important factors to their employees, the original Lindahl study and my duplication of it, showed that employers believed that their employee's top concerns were good wages followed by job security and growth opportunities.

When presented with the previously stated information, attendees at another continuing education program were asked to consider how can we, as employers who work in very close proximity with our employees, not know what is important to them? The answer to that question was surprisingly simple. It was disparate expectations between the reality of the employees and the perception of the employer. The root causes are threefold. First, employers fail to set clear expectations for their employees from the beginning. Second, employers often hold employees accountable even when they have failed to communicate their expectations with clarity. And finally, employers do not hold employees accountable when they fail to follow established policies or procedures.

At the heart of the problem is a failure to communicate. As business owners and managers we assume that information we deem to be important will filter down and out to the right people. This is true in both small and large organizations. As business owners, it is often easier to communicate a message to a patient (parent in the case of a minor) or customer than it is to those whom we employ. It is easier to see and understand the importance of communicating a consistent message to our patient/customer as this is deemed critical to the success of the business. Yet, in reality, it is the failure to communicate a clear consistent message to an employee that is even more critical to the success of the business, regardless of the business model or field of endeavor.

Communicating clear expectations for employees begins before the first interview. This point becomes clearer when one considers that the cost of replacing or adding a new employee can run from \$3000 to \$18,000 depending on the type of employee, the type of business, the training period, loss of productivity, costs of recruitment, etc., for support level team members and up to 150% or more of one's annual salary to replace a senior management or executive team member or a doctor. This is not solely limited to the dental industry; similar information

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*Lowry Consulting LLC, Hoschton, GA.  
Address correspondence to Gay Lowry, Lowry Consulting LLC, 7181  
Wrights Lane, Hoschton, GA 30548. Email: [gay@lowryconsulting.net](mailto:gay@lowryconsulting.net)  
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can be found in research by the Society of Human Resource Management, on Indeed.com, and in a Christina Merhar article published by Zane Benefits in August of 2013.

### **Pre-employment: The dance**

Begin to establish expectations by clearly communicating the requirements for any given position. This is impossible to do if these requirements are not determined prior to the search. Too often, we are in a hurry to fill a spot and miss this crucial step in the process of finding a candidate that will be a good fit long-term. Whether using an agency or an advertisement, the first step is to create a message that clearly defines roles, expectations, and qualifications. If the position requires weekend availability, evening or early morning hours, experience, certification, etc., these requirements must be clearly stated. If a number of years of experience in the field, formal training at an accredited college or technical school, or proficiency with specific dental software is important, it should be stated in the advertisement. Also consider requesting a cover letter and salary expectations to be included with the applicant's resume. This is the first opportunity to determine if a potential candidate is able to follow directions.

### **Sample employment advertisement**

The following is an example of wording for the first communication to prospective employees that needs to be expressed.

Our busy and growing orthodontic practice is in search of a team player to serve as Front Office Coordinator. We require a self-motivated, self-confident, multi-tasker who understands clearly that the patient is the focus of our business. The right person should have 3 to 5 years of experience in the medical/dental/orthodontic setting, be an excellent communicator, friendly, patient, and have experience with (state the specific practice management software you are using if that fact is critical). The candidate person must also have an extensive knowledge of medical/dental/orthodontic insurance.

Duties will include, but are not limited to, answering phones, making appointments,

gathering accurate demographic and insurance data, being an advocate for the patient, parents, and referring dentists/doctors, and be willing to step into any role for the benefit of the patient and the overall success of the practice. Accuracy in data gathering and input is critical.

Interested applicants must submit a cover letter detailing why they should be considered for an interview. The letter must also state the applicant's current salary as well as salary expectations. References will be checked and honesty and integrity will be crucial.

### **Resumes received—What is next**

Most practitioners assume that once resumes have been reviewed, it is time to schedule personal interviews. STOP! The two steps that ultimately save most of the time and money are the phone interview and contacting previous, not current, employer references. Most doctors and managers prefer to skip these steps and move straight to setting up interviews. One might ask, "Is this really necessary?" The answer is a resounding YES! This phase of the process will save the business owner, mid-level management, and the support teams an immense amount of time and money from training someone who eventually turns out to be a bad hire. The purpose of these initial steps is to pre-qualify every candidate. Based on my experience, falsified resumes range from 50% to 70%. The most prevalent false data include incorrect employment dates, educational history, job title, and compensation. Your due diligence is to verify to whatever extent possible the facts stated in a candidate's resume. Use all of the tools available in the screening process including social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. Consider whether the entries found reflect the character of an individual that will represent your business in a positive light.

Considering that a very high number of resumes have errors or falsified information, the next step, before contacting the potential candidate, is to contact previous (not current) employers listed on the resume. Do not call the names or phone numbers listed on the resume. A quick search on the internet to find the previous employer's name, address, and phone number is the first step. Place the call to that employer using

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