It’s likely you realized early on that as the owner of your practice, there are many hats you must wear. You are, after all, “the boss.” You are the one your team looks to for direction, guidance, mediation, fairness, etc. And for many dentists, it’s those “other duties as assigned” that create the biggest headaches in running a practice.

Employees are a needy bunch. You have to tell them what to do. They often require additional training. They can be mercurial. And one particularly frustrating characteristic of most employees — they want regular feedback from you, their boss.

If only signing the paychecks was all that was required to effectively manage a team. Now you need a solid set of skills, a strong sense of integrity and professionalism and a willingness to encourage excellent performance through motivation, accountability and, yes, plenty of constructive feedback.

Most dentists pat themselves on the back if they give employees feedback once or twice a year. “Feedback” as many view it would be that perfunctory exchange that is commonly attached to the annual salary review.

If there are no problems, most likely the dentist tells the employees they are doing a fine job, slaps a couple extra percentage points on the paycheck and quickly strikes this routine matter off the to-do list. “There, that’s done. Now on to real work!”

Or perhaps you are one of those who reasons that if the employee gets a paycheck and isn’t shown to the door that is feedback enough in your book. “If I wasn’t happy they’d know it. Why would I need to give any more feedback than that?” If that’s your story, you’re probably filling vacancies in your office rather regularly.

Maybe your idea of feedback is dropping a subtle hint here or there. The dirty instruments pile up in the sink and you stick a post-it-note above it with a frowning face.

Or let’s say, you’re looking at a record shortfall in income this year and you casually mention in a staff meeting that money is a little tight. This isn’t feedback because:

• It doesn’t help the collections coordinator understand that she needs to increase over-the-counter collections immediately.
• It doesn’t tell the scheduling coordinator that the scheduling to meet production goals is established for a reason.
• The staff members leave the meeting assuming everything is fine where they are concerned. After all, if money were a serious problem surely you’d do more than mention that things are a little tight.
• Meanwhile, you are sure the team is going to take some real steps to improve their performance. (Yet, this is, in fact, not true.)

Vague generalities don’t work and they don’t constitute feedback. So how does the dental practice actually incorporate effective feedback into its systems?

First, drop the notion that feedback is part of the performance/salary review. They are separate issues. Performance rewards must be based on performance measurements, but that is another article.

Daily dose

Constructive feedback should be given and received daily to help employees continuously fine tune and improve the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities. Feedback given and receivedconstructively is a professional pixie dust for the employees.

It’s that unseen magical ingredient that helps them to improve and to grow. It’s also the dentist’s most vital tool in shaping and guiding average employees into effective, high-performing team members.

But expecting anything constructive or positive to come out of occasional doses of feedback is like having a patient who brushes his teeth occasionally yet expects to have excellent oral health. It simply doesn’t happen.

Verbal feedback can be given at any time, but it is most effective at the moment the employee is engaging in the behavior that you either want to praise or correct. If Sue at the front desk negotiated payment from the ever difficult Mrs. Jones with the deft and political acumen of a highly trained peace keeper/financial genius, tell her!

Similarly, if her handling of a situation is not consistent with the practice...
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Feedback given and received daily is professional pixie dust for employees.

Verbal, on-the-spot feedback should be the goal. The environment of the practice should be one that encourages positive feedback and openly provides constructive feedback when necessary.

Choosing to avoid opportunities to give feedback is like choosing to help them to fail.

What goes around comes around

Similarly, dentists should consider soliciting feedback from their teams. Scary thought, isn’t it? It can be handled as simply as asking every employee to anonymously write down one thing that they would change about the office — no personal attacks allowed.

The focus is constructive feedback on a system or a procedure that the employees believe would be an improvement. It could be daily/monthly meetings, new patient packets, scheduling difficulties, increased training opportunities, clear office procedures, conflict resolution strategies, etc.

If you are particularly brave, ask your team to rate you personally on a set of skills such as your leadership, your ability to delegate, your adherence to following established office procedures, your openness to input from the team.

In addition, ask them to identify something specific that they believe you could do to improve your role as leader of the practice.

Remember, all of this is to be anonymous, so do whatever is necessary to make sure the submission of this feedback retains employee anonymity.

For instance, you could set up an external e-mail account (aol, gmail, yahoo!, etc.) and give all employees the access codes to this account (or post it where only employees will see it, such as a breakroom). Then, employees will be able to access the account from home or elsewhere to send an anonymous e-mail to the dentist’s personal address.

Employees: This is for you.

Feedback is only as good as what you might perceive as a negative tone from the messenger. During the next 48 hours, think about the information you have been given and devise three to five steps you can take to change your approach.

For example, Mary the assistant is very frustrated because she feels that Sue at the front desk is interrupting staff members with insignificant matters when they are with patients. Sue’s initial reaction is very negative because she feels that Mary is trivializing her need for clear communication with the staff.

Instead of lashing out, Sue decides to ask for examples and listens to Mary’s perception of the interruptions. She thanks Mary for calling her attention to the issue and decides to focus on addressing the matter constructively rather than reacting negatively to what she could choose to interpret as unjust criticism.

She develops a plan to raise the issue at the next staff meeting and solicit input from the clinical staff. Sue is prepared to share with the team situations in which she has felt the matter necessitated an interruption and would like guidance on how to handle similar matters in the future.

Don’t sit back and wait for feedback; actively solicit it and use it! Recognize that feedback is one of the most critical tools you have in achieving your practice’s full potential.