One or two employees don’t make a ‘team’

If you are losing good employees on a regular basis, do you know why?

By Sally McKenzie, CEO

I recently had a conversation with a dentist on that ever-popular topic: employees. This clinician went on and on about how fortunate he was to have had the “best” office manager any practice could hope for, but now he was frantically looking for someone to replace her because she’d turned in her two-week notice. He was crushed.

I asked him what set this person apart from the others.

“She takes care of everything,” he told me.

I was intrigued. “Everything?” I asked.

The dentist went on to explain that he could delegate virtually anything to this person and it would be done.

This was, indeed, a full-scale enterprise. She would take care of insurance, collections, billing, payroll, recall, staff communications, case presentation, treatment planning. Why, she even oversaw the office parties. If it was someone’s birthday, she baked the cake. What a woman!

In fact, he was about to start a practice newsletter and this employee was going to be responsible for writing, designing and distributing it. This “super manager” might as well have leap-frogged tall buildings and worn a cape. Yet, he was seeing red flags.

“Are all of those duties in her job description?” I asked.

“Oh no,” he puffed. “I don’t like job descriptions; they just limit everyone’s responsibilities.”

Now the alarm bells in my head were blaring loud and clear.

“You mentioned ‘staff communication,’ what does that involve?” I asked.

“I have problems with my other staff. My assistants don’t do things the way I want. The hygienist is too chatty. You know, the usual stuff. I just tell the office manager to handle it and she does.”

This was, indeed, a full-scale alert: no job descriptions, no accountability, no leadership. Clearly, there are significant problems at this practice.

The dentist had used the office manager as a gatekeeper to insulate himself from the other employees and from serious matters that required his direction and involvement.

Whatever issue he didn’t want to deal with, he just handed off to her, from clinical particulars to patient relations to business operations.

Not only was she the office manager, she was she was the de facto leader, responsible for virtually every major system in the practice except the actual dentistry.

Good employees: hard to find and harder to keep

Dentists are often baffled when team members quit. They feel they have been blindsided.

They are left wondering what exactly drives the quality staff to go. In actuality, there are a number of reasons why staff members leave, even during challenging economic times.

Is it the money? Not as often as you might think, although employees will use this as grounds to make their exit because they don’t want to tell you or they are afraid to tell you the real reason.

Certainly, the members of your team want and appreciate salary increases, but money is definitely not the only motivator and it’s clearly not the best motivator to keep good employees.

As long as the staff are paid competitively there is far more to keeping your team intact than tossing a few more buckas their way.

Some leave because of how they perceive they are treated in the workplace. Human resources surveys routinely show that more than 40 percent of employees quit because they don’t feel appreciated by their boss.

Why is that important? Because 50 percent of job satisfaction is determined by the quality of the relationship that staff have with you, the dentist — the boss.

In some cases, the dentist treats the employees disrespectfully. He/she is a screamer, a micromanager or just a plain meanie. These practices churn through good employees at a record pace.

The only ones who stay are the mediocre performers. They stick it out with a bad boss because they don’t have the confidence that they can find another job.

Certainly, many dentists are very nice people. They are not screamers or mean and nasty, but their idea of managing people is to tell them what they are doing wrong, what they should be doing better, where they are falling short and so on.

Alternatively, they say nothing, which is just as bad if not worse. Can you think of specific instances in the past few weeks in which you have clearly and directly told the top performers on your team that you appreciate their work and their contributions?

If not, I can virtually guarantee that they think you neither recognize nor appreciate what they are doing for you and your practice.

Silent soldiers

Oftentimes, when good employees leave, dentists claim they had no idea the employee wasn’t happy. Consider the “super manager” in the example above.

Why didn’t she speak up? It’s not uncommon for the good employees to remain silent. They don’t want to bother the dentist.

They just keep taking the pressure, being the good stewards that they are until they crack. In reality, there is probably little the “super manager” could have done to change her situation.

In situations such as this, the dentist simply will not or cannot see what is going on. This particular dentist believes that his office manager is responsible for “managing” every aspect of the office as the dentist sees it.

In addition, as far as the dentist was concerned: it worked, so why change it? For the employee, she saw only one way to remedy the situation: quit.

The fact is that it is easy to ignore the good employees. After all, they don’t have to be coddled. They can be counted on to get the job done, and they are low- or even no-maintenance.

The dentist tells himself/herself that these employees know what they are doing.

They are good. They are independent. They can handle the additional responsibility. They don’t need or want feedback or coaching.

Mary Kay Miller is founder and CEO of Orthopreneur™ Marketing Solutions. After 50-plus years as a business and marketing coordinator for professional practices, Mary Kay has narrowed her marketing expertise to Internet Web 2.0 marketing, SEO (search engine optimization) and the creation of marketing systems to save teams valuable time and effort.

Her book, “Marketing Your Practice Through Different Eyes,” was released in May 2008 and is a free 100-page eBook available on her Web site www.orthopreneur.com. It is the first multi-media eBook of its kind in dentistry and the first book ever written on marketing for both dentists and team members. It enables dentists and staff members to understand and experience for themselves how the Internet and Web 2.0 marketing engages and grabs the attention of today’s consumer.

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However, thinking this is a big mistake. Your top performers resent that they show up on time (or early), work hard every day, consistently meet or exceed their performance goals, and you say virtually nothing. But you’re going “gaga” over the totally unreliable assistant’s ability to actually take an X-ray that you can read!

Which leads me to another key reason why good employees are hard to keep: You refuse to deal with the problem performers.

There are few things more demoralizing to top-flight staff than a boss who looks the other way when others on the team consistently disregard office policies, bring poor attitudes to work, generate conflict, make excuse after excuse for why they were late, why they were sick, why they simply cannot get their jobs done.

Believe me, your silent soldiers know exactly who’s doing just enough to get by. Yet, they get the same pay raises, same vacation time and the same perks as top performers.

Understandably, capable staff will only tolerate this for so long. As Vince Lombardi once said, “There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals.”

Ultimately, the good employees arrive at the conclusion that the dentist is either a coward or simply prefers the poor performers, so they choose to leave and go to a practice where their contributions are appreciated and the culture encourages rather than discourages excellence.

Wake-up call

It usually takes a seriously troubling event — such as a major financial shortfall, the departure of a critical employee, etc. — for the clinician to wake up to the fact there might be a problem.

From there it takes an outsider, such as a practice management consultant, to sit down with the dentist and discuss his/her frustrations, why he/she cannot trust other staff members, determine where the system shortfalls are occurring, assess training weaknesses and get to the bottom of why the dentist cannot, or will not, lead his/her team.

The case of the super manager above is particularly unfortunate because clearly the dentist had a very dedicated and highly competent employee, which is common. Practices will have one or two rock-solid staff and a host of mediocre chair warmers.

Instead of creating systems of accountability, instituting training programs, developing job descriptions, etc., clinicians will simply pile the critical duties on those that they know they can count on. Ultimately, everyone loses.

The good employees eventually break or burn out. The weak employees are never given the opportunity to grow and flourish.

Moreover, the dentist is losing a fortune because, whether he/she acknowledges it or not, things are falling through the cracks simply because there are not enough capable hands on deck to ensure they don’t.

If you’re losing good employees, don’t just sit back, shake your head and tell yourself “good help is hard to keep.” Find out what is driving the exodus and seek outside assistance if necessary.

Once you get to the root of the problem, I guarantee you’ll see the improvement in your bottom line.