Catch your employees doing something right and tell them every day. Ongoing feedback is absolutely essential in any business environment, but in a small business, particularly a dental practice, in which the success or failure of each system hinges on the performance of a small collection of employees, it is critical. Feedback from the doctor and other members of the team is the only means individuals have to better understand what they can do to improve their own performance. And it’s one of the most essential resources for continuously assessing what is working and what isn’t in your practice.

Most employees genuinely want to perform well. They not only want to meet your expectations, but they also want to exceed them. As the dentist, you are the coach on this team and the members are looking to you for guidance and direction. A practice environment that welcomes and encourages feedback not only helps the doctor shape his/her team, it also enables the dentist to better understand what might be interfering in an employee’s ability to meet specific objectives. Most importantly, it creates a climate in which the team as a whole can examine and solve problems, address challenges, and openly discuss what could be done to improve the performance of specific systems.

Follow these eight steps and use feedback effectively to shape your high performance practice.

1. **Seize the moment.** Verbal feedback can be given at any time, but it is most effective at the time the employee is doing the behavior. As you either want to praise or correct. If Jennifer, the hygienist, reinforced your recommended treatment plan with the ever-rebellious Mr. Sullivan, by gently convincing him that now that the kids are all through school, the time is right to move forward on those implants that he had long been considering, tell her! Rather than walking by and saying “Great job!” tell the staff member exactly what she/he did well. When congratulating Jennifer on her expert handling of a patient, explaining to her how she wants patient inquiries regarding treatment to be handled in the future. In addition, determine whether Carla’s comment reflects a perception that exists among the rest of the team. Do you need to consider scheduling a mini-clinic during the next regularly staff meeting to educate the team on the benefits of specific treatments such as veneers or implants? Does Carla need a clearer understanding of the practice’s treatment financing options? In other words, how can this opportunity to give feedback be used to best educate and help the team view into a stronger, more cohesive team player. Additionally, can it be used to educate and shape other members of the team as well.

2. **Keep your feedback specific.** Rather than saying “Great job!” tell the staff member exactly what she/he did well. When congratulating Jennifer on her expert handling of a patient, explaining to her how she wants patient inquiries regarding treatment to be handled in the future. In addition, determine whether Carla’s comment reflects a perception that exists among the rest of the team. Do you need to consider scheduling a mini-clinic during the next regularly staff meeting to educate the team on the benefits of specific treatments such as veneers or implants? Does Carla need a clearer understanding of the practice’s treatment financing options? In other words, how can this opportunity to give feedback be used to best educate and help the team view into a stronger, more cohesive team player. Additionally, can it be used to educate and shape other members of the team as well.

3. **Give constructive feedback.** By Ms. McKenzie	

4. **Don’t save feedback.** It’s not uncommon for doctors to save up 12 months of what should be day-to-day communication for their annual performance review session with the employee. The dentist meets with the team members one-on-one for 15 minutes once a year. Doctor tells the employee that she/he is doing a fine job but could use a little improvement in a couple of areas. The employee walks away with vague notion that he/she may need to make some corrections but she/he isn’t really clear on exactly what needs to be changed or fixed.

Then the doctor can’t comprehend why the employee doesn’t seem able to maintain any lasting improvements in her/his performance. Then the doctor might temporarily fix those areas the dentist pointed out as lacking and get better for a short time, but, before long, they fall back into the same poor habits. Feedback is an ongoing discussion about the employee’s continuous improvement. Giving it only on an annual basis is a bit like committing to an exercise program one day a year and wondering why your pants are still too tight for the remaining 364. Make it a daily exercise, not a yearly one.

5. **Money is NOT feedback.** Many dentists believe that the annual pay raise constitutes feedback. They reason that if the employee is getting more money the team member should automatically know that their performance is fine. What dentists often don’t realize is that feedback and the annual salary review are and should be completely different actions and conversations. The salary review is a once-a-year discussion about the employee’s performance that is designed to motivate, encourage, and direct the employee regularly and, when necessary, to correct the employee make performance corrections. Money is not feedback, and it’s not the motivator you may think it is.

6. **No news is NOT good news to your employees.** The only feedback to rank lower on the scale than negative feedback is no feedback at all. If employees only hear from you when things are not right, they become resentful and defensive. And when there is no feedback teams are left to wonder about how they are doing in the eyes of the doctor. They begin to fill in the gaps themselves. You may be perfectly happy with an employee’s performance, so you never mention anything. All is well from your standpoint. However, the employee may perceive your silence as quiet discontent. They feel their contribution is not valued and are more likely to explore other employment options where they believe they can improve the success of the practice’s performance, rather than any action at all.

Employees want to know where they stand. They want to know how they are doing on an ongoing basis. Constructive feedback given regularly helps employees continuously fine tune and improve the manner in which they carry out their responsibilities. It’s also the dentist’s most vital tool in shaping and guiding average employees into effective, high-performing team members.

7. **Use constructive feedback to nip problems in the bud.** If you understand what they can do to improve their own performance, you are accurately assessing performance issues as they occur. Moreover, you are continuously setting the tone for how you expect your employees to carry out their duties and interact with you and other employees.

8. **Feedback is a total team effort.** It is not the doctor’s job alone. The dentist may be the head coach, but the entire dental team can constructively guide one another, provided guidelines are established and each member of the team commits to be open to feedback. Too often supervisors and coworkers are overly concerned about offending a staff member they shun opportunities to give feedback. Ideally, the culture of the practice should encourage open feedback among the team members to continuously improve systems and patient services.

Verbal, on-the-spot feedback should be the goal, and the practice environment should encourage positive feedback and openly provide constructive feedback when necessary. Failing to give feedback fails both the individual team member and the practice as a whole.

**About the author**

Sally McKenzie, Certified Management Consultant, is a nationally known lecturer and author. She is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides highly successful and proven management services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Management offers a full line of educational and management products, which are available on its website, www.mckenziegmt.com, and on its wide array of Practice Enrichment Programs and team training. Ms. McKenzie is the editor of the e-Management newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter sent complimentary to practices nationwide. To visit www.mckenziegmt.com and www.thedentistsnetwork.net, Ms. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at 877-777-6511 or at sallymck@mckenziegmt.com.