



## Managing Yourself and Your Employees. A Doctor's Biggest Challenge!

Since many doctors feel that managing employees is the hardest part of their job, the next few issues of *PMM* will be dedicated to giving doctors some tools for making this job easier. Managing employees well is never easy. Once a doctor understands the basic steps of the process and applies the formula, it becomes less stressful. The basic steps are:

- good doctor self-management and setting a good example.
- clear, consistent communication about performance expectations.
- holding employees accountable in a timely manner.

### Self-Management

The most important ingredient for successful employee management is **for a doctor's own self-management to be in place first, especially in times of stress**. It's easy to be a nice guy when things are going well, however, quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. "**The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.**"

In practices with high stress levels, there is often a doctor that has poor self and stress management skills that are contributing factors to the stressful environment. These doctors greatly struggle with managing their practice and employees because they have not realized the part they play in the problem. Instead, they assume the stress is all staff-created.

### Harmful Behaviors

The following is a list of harmful behaviors that I have observed in my 30+ years of working with dental teams. These behaviors can occur in a dental practice in varying degrees of intensity. Read the list and do a

self examination of any behaviors that you feel you need to change to improve your leadership and make managing employees easier.

- **Overbooked schedule:** does not run on time, does not allow adequate time for individual patient care, and does not handle basic daily practice management issues, lunches and bathroom breaks, thus causing high anxiety on a daily basis.
- **Anger management issues:** exhibited by having adult temper tantrums in the office, i.e. out of proportion angry outbursts to situations and/or verbally abusing employees.
- **Moodiness:** makes it hard for employees to interact with the doctor.
- **Perfectionism:** placing unrealistic expectations on themselves and others; using demeaning language when reprimanding employees.
- **Too controlling:** micro-managing employees.
- **Depression:** loss of interest in work, withdrawal.
- **Addiction:** alcohol or drugs used to escape reality.
- **Throwing and breaking instruments:** signs of frustration that are not healthy for yourself or others.
- **Poor work ethic:** repeatedly showing up late for the morning meetings and/or spending too much time on the internet and cell phone, which causes the schedule to fall behind.
- **Substandard clinical skills.**
- **Unethical behavior as related to the state dental practice acts.**
- **Sexual relationship with an employee or infidelity.**
- **Constantly changing the rules without informing staff:** this causes confusion and staff frustration.



If a doctor recognizes themselves or a colleague with any of these behaviors, **it is important they get the help they need to stop the behavior if it has reached a destructive level to themselves and others.** If harmful behaviors are allowed to continue, as a result the following disastrous consequences take place :

- High rates of staff turnover and/or complete loss of staff.
- Loss of staff respect.
- Reduced practice productivity.
- Divorce.
- Addiction.
- Hospitalization for a mental breakdown.
- Suicide (most extreme).

Each state has a dental peer assistance program that can be contacted anonymously for information. The program is designed to provide the doctor who is in trouble before they suffer the inevitable consequences. To help illustrate how destructive these traits can become, I would like to share a true story.

*A middle-age doctor wanted to relocate to another state, so he purchased a practice from a doctor that was ready to retire. The retiring doctor was well-loved and respected by his patients and staff because of his mature and caring personality along with the excellent dentistry that he provided. The new doctor began having staff turnover problems and practice productivity was on the decline. It was not long before I discovered that this doctor was having mood swings and adult temper tantrums in the office. The strong cohesive staff that the selling doctor left behind was beginning to crumble. The writing was on the wall. If the new doctor did not change his ways, then he would completely lose the entire staff that had a long and successful history with the practice.*

The purchasing doctor was actually a nice guy at times, but at other times, he was simply out of control filled with harmful behavior. I shared my observations and predictions with him. I envisioned he would lose his entire staff because no one would want to work within an unhealthy and unpredictable environment.

My recommendation was for him to seek professional help so that he could get back on track. To seek help is nothing that should cause embarrassment or shame. Instead, the saying I like to share with those that I consult is: "My greatest strength is knowing what my weaknesses are and **doing something about them.**" Even as adults, we are still

"works in progress" that can learn new behaviors that will help us to become better human beings.

Unfortunately, the doctor stayed in denial after our conversation and my prediction came true. His entire staff quit in a very short period of time. It took losing his entire staff and a significant plunge in production numbers for him to finally seek the help that he needed. Between counseling and helpful medication he is now successful with his new staff and practice production increased.

This doctor lost all of his high-performing staff because no self-respecting employee with a strong work ethic would tolerate staying in this abusive environment. Instead, they leave to find a better place. A fact in life is ***you will only attract people into your life as emotionally healthy as you are.*** In other words, you will end up surrounded by people who accept the same social rules and codes of behavior as yourself. If a doctor has inappropriate behaviors in his practice, good workers will never stay and workers with poor personal boundaries that are willing to tolerate the bad behavior will be the ones that never leave. As Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher (540 BC – 480 BC) said, "**A man's character is his fate.**"

For all the reasons that I have addressed, good self-management for doctors is the important first step in managing employees well. It is much easier to hold employees accountable for good performance when the doctor is part of the solution and not part of the problem.

As found in a study by Gretchen M. Stein, PhD for the Minnesota Dental Assistance Program, many doctors can struggle with some level of stress management and possible harmful consequences because of the **inherent stresses in dentistry.** It is important for doctors to understand these stresses and take the appropriate actions to counter them.

- **Perfectionism:** a half a millimeter off in dental work means the difference between beautiful work and substandard dentistry. A perfectionist places significant stress on themselves and those with whom they live and work. Since their expectations are never met, they often struggle with deep disappointment and feelings of failure.  
**Action to counter:** set realistic expectations for yourself and others.
- **Isolation of solo practice:** dentists working day-to-day without peer support often go too long without getting the help they need when they are suffering from depression, anxiety disorder, chemical dependency, bi-polar or other life challenges because they **do not**



**realize how poorly they are functioning due to the relative isolation.** Dentists typically ignore helpful staff input but are more apt to listen to someone at their peer level or above.

**Action to counter:** have a practice associate or partner and/or set up a week lunch group with local dentists for support.

- **Financial issues:** a significant debt load is created by the time a dentist graduates from dental school and either starts or purchases a practice. There is pressure to pay off that debt, make money and be successful. Many doctors do not have the skill set to run a small business.

**Action to counter:** get professional help with practice management consultants and CPA.

- **Patient's fear of dentistry:** everyone wants to be liked and appreciated, being the person people fear or dread can take its toll on anyone's psyche.

**Action to counter:** make sure there is a positive culture of appreciation between team members for support.

Some of you may be thinking that none of this applies to you, and for many, that may be true. However, if you are reading this article and **recognize, feel defensive about or are trying to justify some of your behaviors that were listed as being harmful, it is time to take the appropriate steps to better self-management.** It is only when a doctor has his or her own house in order first that they give themselves the **opportunity** to have a high functioning team and are able to manage employees successfully.

***“Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”***

**Albert Einstein**

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## PMM News



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