

Holding Employees Accountable with Clear and Consistent Communication



Many doctors find talking to an employee about lacking job performance issues—skill level, attitude, tardiness, absenteeism and teamwork—one of the hardest parts of their job. This is a common issue with many dentists because the type of trait profile that is attracted into dentistry is one that can also have conflict avoidance in their mix of traits.

The good news is that if you struggle with this, you are normal and that handling this challenge is not as hard or painful as you think. The bad news is that if you continue to operate this way, your good workers lose respect for you, get frustrated and leave for other jobs. This causes your team to eventually dumb down to a mix of manipulative, low-functioning employees with bad attitudes and poor work ethics. This makes coming to work each day a nightmare of endless problems.

If you cowboy-up, as we say in Colorado, and promptly hold employees accountable for proper job performance, your reward will be an enjoyable, high functioning team that supports your practice vision and makes coming to work each day is a pleasure. Below outlines a process to develop better skills to get this job done.

Playground Rules

Think of your dental practice as a playground and the employees are the kids who come over to the playground and play the team sport of pediatric dentistry each day. You, the doctor, are the playground monitor who makes sure that the kids play by the playground rules so the game is fun and the playground is a safe place to be each day.

Biting, kicking and bullying are not allowed on the playground. This behavior can take the form of a team member not completing duties, being late for work, having a negative attitude, creating conflict or bullying other team members. These behaviors break the playground rules and hold the team back from enjoying a fun practice environment and a more productive practice where everyone benefits.

Promptly address an employee's poor behavior. If ignored by the playground monitor, it becomes demoralizing to the good workers and team morale, and productivity drops.

Why Employees Do Not Perform

There are five reasons why an employee does not do what they are supposed to do. When holding an employee accountable, first decide which of the five reasons apply to the poor performer and then take the appropriate action.

- **They do not know what it is they are supposed to do.**
 - Problem: Communication.
 - Solution: Communicate clearly defined job descriptions and benchmarks of acceptable performance.

- **They do not know how to do it.**
 - Problem: Training.
 - Solution: Train before asking for performance or coach to acceptable performance.
- **They are not capable of doing it.**
 - Problem: Ability and skill level.
 - Solution: Replace or adjust job description if appropriate.
- **They refuse to do it.**
 - Problem: Insubordination. Many times doctors do not realize that insubordination is taking place. This is a complete lack of respect for authority and rules.
 - Solution: Replace. There is no room on the playground for someone that refuses to play by the rules and not support the doctor's practice vision.
- **They do not have a reason why they should do it.**
 - Problem: Motivation. They are skipping the task because they do not see that it is necessary.
 - Solution: Give them a reason that makes sense to them and how the task is important to the big picture.

Positive Coaching Verbal Skill

Most staff members that I consult with want to do their job well, and want the doctor to tell them what to do differently to improve their level of performance. Without this feedback, the employee is not given a chance to grow.



Think of performance feedback as positive coaching rather than constructive criticism to help the employee be more successful in their job. Remember the goal of coaching is to improve performance—just like coaching in a sport—not just to enumerate the problems.

There is a right way and wrong way to communicate your positive coaching to the employee. Do not begin your sentences with the word “You” and then use superlatives in a negative context, for example; “You never...”, or “You always...” this puts the employee on the defensive and shuts down communication.

A more effective way to communicate is to use the sandwich technique. First, start with the word “I” and tell the employee what you appreciate or value about them. Second, tell them what you want them to do differently and why. And third, end with a positive statement of encouragement.

Positive Coaching Script

- Speak directly to the employee. Never complain about one employee to another. This is gossip and destructive to the team.
- Tell the employee what they are doing well, or what you value in their performance. This helps the employee clearly understand what level of performance is satisfactory and now there are new performance expectations.
 - “I want you to know that I really appreciate how you are here every day and hardly ever miss work.”
- Avoid using the word “but” after you express what you like about the employee’s performance. Replace the word but with the word “now” and tell them specifically what you want done differently.
 - “Susan, I really like the way you ... now, to take your job performance to its next level, I would like you to...” or “This is the next level I would like to see you take your performance to...” or “Where I would like to see you concentrate for the next few months is...”
- Tell the employee specifically how you want their performance to be different. Employees are not mind readers and can do better when things are spelled out and expectations are clear.
- When performance changes are requested of an employee, there are three questions that the doctor should ask to help get insight into whether or not the employee will be successful with the request. Depending upon the employee’s response, the doctor will know how to respond.

- “Is this something you think you can do?”
- “What kind of help do you need to make this change?”
- “Is this something you want to do?”
 - If the employee responds “No” to this question, the doctor has to determine if insubordination may be a problem.

- End with an encouraging statement.
 - “I’m confident that you have the ability to accomplish this request. Please let me know how I can help you achieve this goal.”
- Set up another meeting time in the future to give the employee feedback on the requested change in their performance.
- If the behavior or job performance is strongly lacking, tell the employee: “You need to know your job is in jeopardy and you are on probation until your job performance improves. If there is no improvement, then you will be terminated.”
- Document all conversations. A good paper trail is vital if an employee may be terminated. When an employee is on probation they should not participate in bonuses, trips or any other type of rewards that take place. There must be a consequence to being placed on probation.

Communication Pathways

Employees cannot meet a performance expectation if it is not clearly communicated to them. Many times doctors assume that the employee already knows what they should be doing. Clear communication helps stop misunderstandings and can be achieved through:

- Written job descriptions with appropriate benchmarks of performance. For example, below are some of the benchmarks the team member in charge of practice collections should be given to meet that would indicate the collections in the practice are healthy:
 - Collection ratio of 98 percent or more;
 - Accounts receivable total not greater than the average monthly production;
 - Accounts receivable total that is 61 day and older is not more than 18 percent to 24 percent of the total accounts receivable.
- Employee manual that describes employee benefits and the practice (playground) rules and consequences if the rules are not followed.



- Annual performance reviews that tell the employee what they are doing well and what areas need to be improved and by when.
- Positive coaching on a consistent basis in training the employee on how to do their job better.
- Doctor's practice vision should be shared annually on what the doctor is trying to create. This will set the stage for the next 12 months and help the team focus their efforts to achieve the desired improvements.
- Morning meetings done well set the tone and level of productivity for the day. They help the team focus on how to get through the day's schedule with reduced stress and increased production opportunities.
- Monthly team meetings create the forum for the team to discuss what is working well, what is not and problem solve for the appropriate solution to create better work pathways with each other.
- Quarterly department meetings. There can be up to four departments in a pediatric dental office: front desk, assistants (restorative), hygienist (recall) and management (if there is an office manager or more than one doctor). When each department meets quarterly with the doctor, they are able to discuss and problem solve specific department issues, job duties and system changes. Monthly team meetings should be more focused on the bigger picture of meeting practice vital signs, team interactions and CE.

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

Albert Einstein

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