



## Managing Employees Means Being a Good Playground Monitor

No one ever told you that when you became a pediatric dentist that you also had to become a playground monitor! When I teach doctors about the leadership skills of employee management, I use the metaphor that the doctor is the playground monitor in charge of keeping the playground (practice) fun and safe everyday for the kids (employees) to play on. It is the playground monitor's job to tell the kids what the rules of the playground are and to make sure the kids follow the rules and don't bite, kick or pull each other's hair.

### No Biting or Kicking Allowed

Employee management is that simple—do not allow biting or kicking on your playground! If one of the kids is hurting the other kids, they are told to stop the hurtful behavior, and if they cannot stop, then they must go home until they can play nice.

Biting and kicking in the dental office could be any of the following behaviors:

- poor job performance;
- not completing all job duties forcing another employee to pick up the slack;
- negative attitude, tardiness, lying or bullying.

These are all behaviors that hurt the other kids (employees) and make the playground not fun and unsafe to come over and play on. If the playground monitor does not take control, then the nice kids will eventually find another playground to play on that is more fun and only the mean kids will be left to duke it out with each other. Sound familiar? Have you ever had a good employee leave because the team was not getting along?

Some doctors feel lost in how to manage the biting and kicking that takes place in their practice. It is actually very straightforward. Within this issue of *PMM*, you will find the steps to help successfully manage employees to work towards a common goal.

### Three Steps to Good Employee Management

In the last article of *PMM*, I introduced the first step in managing employees successfully—a doctor has to have his own house in order before he has the **opportunity** to manage a high functioning team. A doctor must possess good stress management skills, be positive and consistent, and offer a strong example of how he would like his employees to behave in terms of work ethic and treating patients and co-workers well.

The next two steps are **clear and consistent communication about performance expectations** (rules of the playground) and **holding employees (kids) accountable** in a timely manner for good job performance (following the rules and playing nice with each other).

### Clear and Consistent Communication

Employees cannot meet a performance expectation if their responsibilities are not clearly communicated to them. Many times doctors assume that the employees already know what they should be doing. Clear communication helps prevent misunderstandings and can be achieved through a series of steps:

- Written job descriptions with appropriate benchmarks of performance. For example, a team member in charge of practice collections should be given the following benchmarks to meet that would indicate the collections in the practice are healthy:
  - Collection ratio of 98 percent+.
  - Accounts receivable (**A/R**) total not to exceed the average monthly production.
  - A/R total that is 61 days and older falls between 18 percent to 24 percent of the total A/R.



- Employee manual that describes employee benefits and the practice (playground) rules and lists the 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 what date.
- Positive coaching on a consistent basis will help train the employee on how to do their job better.
- Doctor's practice vision of what they are trying to create should be shared annually. This will set the stage for the next 12 months on what the team should focus on to achieve the desired improvements and goals.
- Morning meetings done well set the tone by sharing the level of expected productivity for the day. They help the team focus on how to get through the day's schedule with reduced stress and 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, hygienist (recall) and management (if there is an office manager and/or more than one doctor). When each department meets quarterly with the doctor they are able to discuss and problem-solve department specific issues, such as job duties and system changes. Quarterly department meetings are unlike the monthly team meetings, which may be more focused on the bigger picture of the practice—vital signs, team interactions and CE.

## Holding Employees Accountable

It is the playground monitor's most important job to make sure that all of the kids are treated equally and play by the same rules. An employee's poor behavior must be addressed promptly because the nice kids become very resentful and lose respect for the playground monitor if the playground monitor looks the other way and does not address the fact that some of the kids are not playing by the rules. It is very demoralizing to your good workers to work with a team member who does only enough to get by, is tardy, is not held to the same office policies, has a negative attitude, creates conflict, bullies and uses excuses regarding her poor performance. All of these behaviors break the playground

rules and hold the team back from enjoying a fun practice environment and a more productive practice that can benefit everyone.

## Why Employees Don't Perform

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

### 1. They don't know what it is they are supposed to do.

Problem: communication.

Solution: clearly defined job descriptions and benchmarks of acceptable performance.

### 2. They don't know how to do it.

Problem: training.

Solution: train before asking for performance or coach to acceptable performance.

### 3. They are not capable of doing it.

Problem: ability and skill level.

Solution: replace or adjust job description if appropriate.

### 4. 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.

### 5. They don't 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.

## Coach to Improve Performance

Below are 10 steps to follow when it is time to talk to an employee about their performance or attitude. Either the employee will choose to be successful with the positive coaching that is offered or the right actions have to be put in motion to remove the employee from the team.

1. Ask Yourself: As their leader, have I **provided the appropriate training, time and tools for them to perform adequately?** If not, provide these items and see if the desired job performance is achieved. If they have



- been provided and the employee's performance is lacking, move to step #2.
2. **Speak directly to the employee.** Do NOT complain to other employees about the poor performer.
  3. Tell them **what they are doing well or what you value** in their performance.
  4. Tell them **specifically what you want done differently.**
  5. Tell them **specifically how you want it done differently.**
  6. Ask them, **"Is this something you think you can do?"**
    - If they answer no, ask them why. Provide needed coaching to raise their skill level.
  7. Ask them, **"Is this something you want to do?"**
    - If they answer no, ask them why. Determine if you are dealing with insubordination or lack of motivation and seeing the importance of the task.
  8. **Set up another meeting time** to give them feedback on the requested change in their performance.
  9. If the behavior or job performance is **strongly lacking**, then tell them that they need to know that their job is in jeopardy and **they are on probation** until their job performance improves. Share with them that if this requested change does not take place, then they will be terminated. Remind the employees that it is your hope that they choose to be successful in your practice and that choice is up to them. Your goal is to help every employee reach his or her full potential.
  10. **Document all conversations** about job performance because they may be needed if the employee's behavior change does not take place and they are terminated for the greater good of the team.

Life is short, so make each day on your playground as enjoyable as you can and you will have greater fun and success!

***"It is the child in man that is the source of his uniqueness and creativeness, and the playground is the optimal milieu for the unfolding of his capacities."***

**Eric Hoffer**  
(1902 - 1983)

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