



LCP Dental Team Coaching (the new name for Julie Weir & Associates) is recognized as the premier consulting firm specializing in pediatric dentistry since 1996.

Five Remedies for a Toxic Work Culture

Negative attitudes and behaviors weigh heavily on dental practices and are challenging to deal with. Negativity spreads like a common cold and before the dentist realizes it, the team is sick, and the practice is suffering. Unresolved conflict causes tension, anxiety, poor productivity, and interferes with patient care. Conflict becomes harder to resolve the longer it is ignored. The first step in solving conflict is to recognize there is a problem. This can be challenging, especially for a busy doctor trying to see patients or for a leader who is trying to keep the practice running. For the conflict-avoidant leader, it may be natural to evade confrontational situations. Confrontation is critical to team effectiveness, even though it can be uncomfortable. Below are five types of toxic behaviors and the remedies to aid in healing a practice.

5 TYPES OF TOXIC BEHAVIORS AND REMEDIES

1. Pessimism

Symptoms: Pessimistic team members portray a “can’t do,” negative personality. These employees typically display poor work ethic and low morale which has a damaging effect on the team. A pessimist lists all the potential problems for the day before the day even begins. They may sigh and groan during Morning Huddle about a challenging patient coming in for their restorative visit. They may even try to pass their responsibilities off to another person. Negative attitudes and behaviors are contagious, especially when leaders are negative about the schedule and their patients. If negative attitudes are ignored, their impact will spread quickly.

Remedy: A fun-loving and encouraging environment.

Dealing with pessimism can be challenging and exhausting. It is imperative that negativity halts before team morale and productivity diminishes. At the first sign of a pessimistic team member, address the situation immediately. Meet one-on-one and let them know how their negativity impacts others in the office. Use the phrase “you may not realize” to address the behavior and to keep their actions separate from them as individuals. Clarify where the negativity comes from. Is the employee frustrated or do they feel a lack of appreciation from their team members or leadership? If they do not respond positively to the feedback or discussions, it may be time to let them go. Even a well-developed team member is not valuable when their negativity affects team productivity. As you begin each day, keep in mind that the dentist and leader’s attitudes set the mood for the day within the first two hours.

2. Gossip

Symptoms: Gossip afflicts most dental practices and is another form of harmful behavior in the workplace that negatively impacts team morale. It also creates distrust and skepticism, especially when this behavior comes from a leader.

A team member may spread gossip about another employee, leadership or the doctor. They also may try to get other team members to partake in gossiping with them.

Remedy: An environment where respect is given and received.

Leaders should coach gossipers to speak about their team members in appropriate and healthy ways. Meet one-on-one and discuss the implications for speaking negatively and how gossiping can damage a person’s self-esteem. Let them know that gossip is unacceptable in the workplace and must stop immediately. Document the behavior and get the team member to sign that you have discussed this with them. Be sure to store it in their employee file. Consider having a “positivity jar” in your office for team members to drop notes in expressing appreciation for one another. Share a couple of these notes with your team each day during Morning Huddle.

3. Blaming Others

Symptoms: When a team member refuses to take responsibility for their actions, it shows a lack of accountability. Everyone makes mistakes from time to time; however, blaming another person is an unhealthy response. An assistant may be blamed for not ordering gloves, when in fact, another assistant did not pull the tag and give it to them to order. Blaming others helps a person save face but creates a toxic environment where no one feels safe or protected. Blaming others can be a sign of people not feeling safe enough to be vulnerable or honest.

Remedy: Help them to cultivate a proactive mindset by making your expectations clear.

Counteracting blame begins with accountability. Leaders must hold team members accountable even when blame is shifted to another employee. Keep the focus on what the team member is responsible for and identify the reason for incomplete tasks. Make sure the team members possess the training and resources necessary to meet expectations.

4. Passive Aggression

Symptoms: Passive aggressiveness aims to harm another team member with indirect words or actions. These behaviors can be as harmful to your team as direct aggression. Some common characteristics are talking under their breath, spreading rumors, downplaying another's achievements or retaliating by setting another person up to fail. These behaviors are often done with subtlety, which can make identifying these issues particularly difficult.

Remedy: Create a safe space for team members to share concerns. Discuss with the team member one-on-one about specific instances you have witnessed or heard about. Explain that they are in a safe space to discuss their concerns. A passive aggressive person withdraws even further if they feel cornered or confronted. Once you identify the cause of their behavior, reassure them that you will help them to overcome challenges or obstacles they are facing to improve their work environment. Team members desire safety in their work environments and should feel comfortable communicating with one another without retaliation. No one can control how someone receives what they say; however, they can control the manner in which it is delivered.

5. Bullying

Symptoms: Bullying is a serious infraction that creates lasting emotional and psychological effects on your team members. A bully can aggressively attack your team members with words or actions. Some actions a bully might display include verbal criticism, picking on a team member through exclusion and isolation, and micromanagement. By the time a

dentist learns about this behavior, the situation is worse than what the dentist has been told. Bullies behave properly when in the dentist's presence but act completely different when they are around certain team members. They know who they can antagonize and who will not tolerate it.

Remedy: Does your team trust you to have their best interest at heart? Your office will become a bully-free zone when people know they can address concerns with the dentist, and it gets resolved. At the first sign of a bully, pull the team member aside and explain that their actions are not tolerated. Document the behavior and let the team member know that if it were to happen again, they will be terminated. If someone were being a bully to your own child on a playground, you would take the necessary steps to end the harm and create a safe environment.

A healthy practice culture is the goal. Recognizing the problem is the first step in managing negative behaviors and attitudes in your practice. Addressing conflict early and directly is the most impactful way to combat problems before they fester. A positive, productive team creates a healthy and profitable practice. It is the leadership team's responsibility to display appropriate, positive behaviors. Set clear standards and guidelines from the beginning with an up-to-date employee manual and consistent accountability efforts. Keep open communication with your team and reward positive behaviors with fun days, team outings and lunches, unexpected bonuses and incentives. A positive attitude is contagious, and the perfect remedy to a toxic environment. It is important to create a positive relationship with your team members first. Treat your team as you would like your patients and parents to be treated and this will be reflected in your profitability!

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