

Don't Bungle Attempts to Show Appreciation

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“How could she think I didn't care?” was the question posed to me by a client whose best dental assistant just told him she was leaving for “. . . a better job where her skills would not be taken for granted.” Unfortunately, this doctor learned the hard way that good performance is a treasured commodity in a dental office and great performers thrive on recognition.

I have seen time and time again, when dentists give recognition to individual staff members; they often cause more harm than good. How can such good intentions work against them?

Applauding the staff during an office meeting is the easiest way to give recognition, however you still have to be careful. Consider when praise is given to the entire staff, it may not get distributed evenly. Part-time staff may feel that too much praise had been heaped upon them, while the full-time staff may feel there was not enough.

Most of us usually think of tangible gifts when we think of recognition, especially recognition at work, such as a cash bonus or flowers. These tangible items are certainly a step in the right direction in rewarding staff that do a great job, but the best, most effective recognition does not have a price tag, no one can see it, or touch it.

I remember consulting with a dentist who made it a tradition near the end of the year to prepare and serve a special holiday lunch for the staff at the office. Even the doctor's wife would show up to help out. The personal touch made the luncheon fun and exciting. While everyone enjoyed the meal, what really made them feel important and appreciated was the time and attention of the doctor and his wife. The staff knew they were taking time from their own schedules just to be with them.

Woody Allen says, “80 percent of success is showing up.” and I do not think he could be more correct. What we give our attention to shows the staff involved that you value it. And praise given promptly, really packs a punch in affecting a staff member's decisions in how they do their job.

Because individuals are more likely to repeat performance that has been rewarded with praise, be selective about giving time and attention. Don't just let squeaky wheels get the grease. Whatever you attend to, you will likely get more of the same because you are sending the message “this is important to me.”

Seek out staff members who regularly show up for work on time and tell them how much you appreciate being able to depend on them.

A doctor once said to me, “Cindy does such a great job and is very reliable. She knows how I feel. I do not have to say anything to her.” Wrong! She is the one who needs to hear your praise the most.

Often doctors tell me they are confused as to why they have to go through the trouble of patting staff on the back when they are getting paid to do a job. Telling a staff member “I noticed what you did” is not necessarily natural for most of us. We tend to expect a certain level of performance from staff and have difficulty understanding when they do not do what they are paid to do.

Doctors as leaders have to work hard at giving deserved recognition, not just for “above and beyond” performance, but for expected dependable and consistent performance, which keep their practices running every day. It is too easy to take your good performers for granted, letting “no news be good news” become our manner of operating. When this happens, the staff forms the impression that what they do is of no value. Taken to an extreme, their tank runs empty. Their job becomes meaningless because their performance does not seem to matter.

There are a number of ways to give positive reinforcement to those who are conscientious and to those who are beginning to show signs of improvement.

Here are a few:

- Before making a decision on a particular problem, ask someone on the staff for their opinion. Then listen without judgment. Demonstrating that you value an experienced staff members knowledge and opinion is a powerful way to show respect for their skills and give them a chance to disclose what they know.
- Take time to mention anything you notice that they do well. This would also include everyday job duties, not just the above-and-beyond stuff.
- Give a simple thumbs-up sign, when you see someone in the act of doing something positive and productive.
- Do not forget that acknowledgment of routine items goes along way. While reviewing the schedule or monitoring your practice statistics during staff and departmental meetings, make specific mention of a job well done.
- If you tend to forget something and remember later, write the staff member a short note and mail it to their home.
- Keep detailed and accurate personnel records so you will remember family names, anniversaries, and birth dates. Store this information in your computer “tickler file” to notify you of a pending event.

Time and attention are the most valuable things you can give to your staff. And you sometimes give it just by putting a smile on your face.