

Hiring Winners for your Dental Team

A significant aspect of a successful dental practice today is having the ability to hire, train and sustain a group of people that will work as a team for a common goal. The goal will come from the dentist's personal philosophy, mission and purpose. In addition, the dentist must have a businesslike approach to bring clarity to guidelines and policies for individual team members. The following recommendations are designed to guide the dentist in both areas and maintain balance between the two.

PREPARATION: THE MOST IMPORTANT STEPS

Budget

The first step in the hiring process is setting a budget. Just as each expense within the practice overhead should have a budget allotment, the cost of staff should also.

Costs must first be separated. They can be separated into the following categories and percentages:

- Administrative, clinical staff - 15-18 percent;
- Hygiene staff - 4-9 percent;
- Payroll tax - 2.5 percent;
- Benefits - 1-3 percent;

These are only guidelines, and exceptions to these numbers will generally involve two circumstances: The dentist starting a practice from scratch, whereby he or she will have zero production on which to base the budget, and the practice that develops more than four days a week of hygiene percent will go up relative to the number of hygiene days.

In reference to the hygiene compensation, the most appropriate method to check the cost effectiveness of the hygienist is to set a goal for hygiene production that will be three times the hygiene compensation or 33 percent of production. I recommend an hourly or daily rate of compensation for the hygienist rather than commission. When the hygienist is paid on commission, it is difficult for the dentist to establish a profit margin as the practice grows because with every fee increase, the hygienist's pay will increase comparatively.

Hourly vs. Salary

When deciding whether to have hourly or salaried employees, it is critical to check all ramifications in reference to state labor laws. I always recommend hourly compensation because it is tracked according to hours per day or week to complete compensation for each individual. For overtime work, which is work in excess of eight hours per day, an employee must receive compensation at time and a half. There are exceptions. They involve specific work schedules and require paperwork that documents such an exception. If you are willing to explore this avenue, it is critical that you do not take it upon yourself to set independent rules. The penalty for not complying in this area is severe.

It is also recommended that you have a time clock. They are not expensive and will save you tremendous problems should there be a dispute. The time clock benefits the employee and the employer because it allows for fair and undisputed compensation. The guidelines for using it must be discussed with the team to eliminate misunderstanding. For example, staff members should clock in at a specific time in the morning and when going home. It is not open. Also, when going and coming from lunch the time clock is used.

Benefits

Benefits, for the most part, take into consideration such items as:

- Medical coverage;
- Dental coverage;
- Sick/well days;
- Vacation;
- Pension;
- Leaves of absence; and
- Uniform allowance.

There can be additional benefits; however, those on the list above appear to be the most desired and discussed within the team. The dentist just starting out will have difficulty affording all benefits; therefore, priorities must be set and, as production allows, additional benefits can be allocated. It is important to sit down with each employee as he or she is hired to determine which compensation package will work best for them. Often, you will find that an employee will take a smaller hourly rate for assistance with medical coverage. Customizing is ideal and will demonstrate your ability to recognize individual employees' needs, which is one of the most valued aspects of keeping a winning team!

Job Descriptions

One way of defining job descriptions is to use the term expectations. If you verbalize your expectations of the employee, you can then sit down together and write out the job description. Problems arise when the employer has specific expectations and does not communicate them. This sets up the new employee to fail.

Written job descriptions are necessary, but they do not complete the project. It is also important to state the priorities for the employee so tasks are done in a timely manner.

The biggest mistake an employer can make is to assume that an employee knows exactly how the employer wants the job done. No two dental practices are alike; and, therefore, you must design the positions to meet your goals.

Job descriptions in their generic form are often included in the employee manual and may be provided by the consultant you may be working with. Just remember, in most cases, they must be customized to fit the employer, employee and practice as a whole.

THE HIRING PROCESS

Placing an Ad

If you want winners on your team, your ad must make a winning statement. These steps should be completed when placing an ad:

- Review the ads in the paper in the section you will use. You don't necessarily have to place your ad in the dental section because many terrific team members have come from administrative, banking, medical and marketing fields.
- Identify the specific position so the ad will not be misleading. It is often a good idea to name your location.
- Compose a noticeable ad that hopefully would attract the ideal candidates. It might look like this:

Growing dental practice in XXX is looking for an enthusiastic, energetic, organized, front office administrator to assist in further marketing and organizing a practice for the future. The position offers outstanding benefits included in a compensation package of up to \$XX,XXX per year. If you are a people person looking for an outstanding opportunity, please send your resume to XXXXX.

It is recommended that you ask for resumes if you have time to look at them because the most professional individuals will have them.

Interviewing

I have interviewed potential employees for my clients for 15 years, and I have yet to discover the interview that is certain to alleviate your future concerns and guarantee the new relationship. It is one of the reasons I always recommend a "working interview" with the applicants. Following the verbal interview, you should ask them to come to your office for one day, for which you will pay them; and during this time they and you can better evaluate the possibilities of working together.

When an applicant spends the day with you, be sure to have a written agenda that he or she can follow. Describe what you want that person to observe and describe exactly what you would like him or her to participate in throughout the day. Do not leave it up to the applicant because he or she may feel uncomfortable just stepping into a procedure. Keep in mind, you are evaluating the person's general approach to the patients' needs and interaction with other team members. Do not become too critical of a few verbal skills because after the person is hired you can integrate new skills in the training process.

When approaching the initial interview and screening process, be sure to include the following in your evaluation:

- Timeliness for interview;
- Appearance; and
- Organization (having all licenses, applications, reference letters etc. complete).

When interviewing, be sure to listen more than you talk and to ask open-ended questions that will give you insight into the values and personality traits of the individual. Questions you may wish to consider are:

- What did you like most and least about previous positions and why?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals in reference to dentistry and your career?
- If you were to describe the ideal setting for your next job what would it be?
- When making an appointment for a patient, can you give me an example of what you would say?
- When making a financial arrangement for a patient, can you give me an example of what you would say?

The answers and the manner in which they are answered will give you more insight into whom you are hiring than if you ask questions that can be answered simply with "yes" or "no."

Checking References

The next step is checking references. Sometimes, this does not produce great results because many dentists do not want to jeopardize themselves legally by giving information that would later be used in turning down the applicant. However, I highly recommend asking the applicant if you can contact previous employers and simply ask them the following question: "If you had the chance to hire XXX again would you?"

Employee Records

Now that you have hired the ideal employee to add to your team, it is important that you set up the appropriate records. The application and copies of certificates, licenses and the resume will be the beginning. You must also have on file who to contact regarding an emergency and the employee's signature indication that he or she has read and understood your employee manual. Additional forms and documents will be added as performance reviews take place.

Training Protocol

As I mentioned, do not assume the new employee will know the job as you want it done. To eliminate communication problems in the future, it is important to do the following:

- Assign a current employee to the new employee for training and orientation (Remember, he or she may not even know where to go for lunch). If you do not have any other employees, it will be you!
- List all tasks you would like this person to master. Prioritize the list and set a time line. Be sure the new person agrees and gets a copy. Schedule meetings once a week if possible to see how he or she is doing.
- Schedule performance reviews every four weeks for the first three months. It is very important to give the new employee feedback and hear from him or her as to how progress is being made. This will seem time-consuming, but it will pay off.

Maintaining the Relationship

Taking the steps outlined in this article may be difficult at first, but with organization and practice a dentist can become very comfortable and confident with the process. The most difficult area I deal with is what comes next.

Communication

I have always tried to understand why good communication is so difficult to achieve, but it really doesn't matter because my job is to make you aware of communication pitfalls and give you some helpful, basic hints that can save you a great deal of grief.

The issue will go to knowing yourself. What I mean is, are you able to confront issues when they arise? If you are honest and know this is a weakness, seek advisement early on in your practice. Each day in your practice there will be issues

that arise. Some will be very small, and others will be far more disruptive. If you can learn the skill to move through the issues each day, week, month, and year, your practice will be in the top 10 percent. This, of course, is due to the fact that the winning team will take you there, but they won't budge if they are not heard.

Programs such as leadership effectiveness training will teach you, hands-on, how to develop the skills to handle these situations. Also, a consultant can facilitate and coach you to be a better leader.

If you are not adept in conflict resolution, problems will accumulate within your group and explosions will occur. When this happens, excellent employees often leave, which can affect the practice dramatically. Each employee change, it is said, costs the practice \$10,000, not to mention the negative affect on the morale and motivation of the entire team.

Team Meetings

This is one ideal way to keep communication lines open and there are three types of meetings to become familiar with:

- Morning huddle;
- Monthly meeting; and
- Annual retreat.

Bonus/Salary Increase

Whether you give bonuses and/or salary increases, it is important to maintain the budget you allotted when you formalized your business plan. I have found, when talking to staff around the country, that for the most part they want raises regularly, generally yearly, if possible. If the practice production increases and the expenses stay the same, you should be able to give an increase. A small raise is better than no raise because it shows recognition for individual efforts.

It is very important that the employer keep track of anniversary dates for employees and schedule salary review meetings. The employee should never have to remind the dentist that it is time for the review. It is ideal if you can separate salary reviews from performance reviews, but it is difficult.

A bonus can be structured in addition to raises; however, it is important to structure the formula for a win-win outcome.

Keep in mind the following suggestions when thinking about a bonus program.

- Always base it on collection rather than production. The money must be collected before it can be distributed, and if you produced it and collections are solid, it should come in the following month.
- Average the collection for no less than three months and as long as 12 months. This will take into consideration low production months due to holidays, vacations, etc.
- Set the bonus upon the percent in which you establish payroll. Example: 15 percent. When collections increase to create a greater margin, thereby dropping the percent, the staff can have the difference distributed between themselves evenly.
- Never lock a bonus in for more than one year and review it after that time. You may give raises and thereby increase your break-even point for the upcoming year.

Performance Reviews

This review should take place once a year. The purpose is to provide communication between the employer and the employee and achieve greater success for both in the upcoming year.

To begin this process, schedule a date and give you at least one week's notice to the employee. This will give you and him or her time to make notes and put thoughts together. The basic dialogue should include specific tasks you think the employee is doing well. The employee can then share with you the areas he or she believes he or she is excelling in. Compare to see if you are on the same wavelength. Do the same thing regarding tasks that you and he or she think can be improved. Select one or two of the areas of recommended improvement and design a game plan to get there. Set a time frame and outline any outside assistance or training that may be beneficial.

A follow-up date should be scheduled when you can discuss the improvement. The paperwork from both parties will be filed in the employee's record folder. Please note that in most cases the forms for these reviews are included in employee manuals and detailed instruction as to how to use them is included.