

10 Strategies for Successful Staff Retention

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Why do staff members often feel underpaid, underappreciated, and overworked? Conversely, why do doctors complain that they are taken advantage of, manipulated, and short-changed? This resultant dichotomy of views is one of the major contributing factors to high staff turnover – an incredibly costly and stressful ordeal that naturally sends the wrong message to patients regarding the leadership ability of the dentist. Patients love to see familiar faces when they return to the office and cherish long-term comfortable relationships with office staff members.

Retaining a loyal, hardworking, and talented staff is the number one management challenge in dentistry today, because you just can't have a great practice without a great staff. Successfully managing a dental practice is much too complicated to do alone. Staff retention is a complex issue, but it ultimately revolves around two main areas – compensation and communication. From my perspective as a management consultant, having worked with hundreds of different dental practices, I would like to offer my observations about 10 strategies that successful dentists employ to create great relationships with their staff members.

1. **Develop a vision for your practice and then clearly share it with your staff.** If your staff doesn't know what the vision or the mission is, that is a problem. If your staff knows the vision, but doesn't share or support it, then that is an even bigger problem. Everyone needs to be on the same page. As time goes by, the doctor needs to fine-tune and reinforce the vision, leading by example and continuing to coach and motivate the members of the team.
2. **Understand the realities of the marketplace.** Good staff is hard to find. Make a commitment to hiring the best possible person for each position and don't compromise. Be willing to pay for talent. It is much less expensive in the long run to pay a little more for the right staff person who will ultimately become a cherished long-term employee. Allow existing staff to have a definite role in the hiring process. And remember to be flexible – in today's world, job sharing might be a viable option.
3. **Create the best workplace environment for the staff.** This would include a good benefits package, up-to-date technology, and continuing education opportunities. Good staff like to work with other good staff. It is difficult to be a positive influence in a negative environment. Ask yourself this difficult question, "Would I want to work here? Would this be an attractive opportunity if I were looking for a job?"
4. **Let your staff know that you care about them and appreciate their efforts.** Surveys show that what staff want most, even more than money, is positive reinforcement from their immediate supervisory (the doctor) that they are doing an excellent job. Don't be so quick to continually criticize or find fault. Look for opportunities to thank your staff on a daily basis for good job performance. Institute a program for quarterly staff reviews as opposed to annual reviews. Offer praise where appropriate and make suggestions for areas that need improvement. More importantly, never reprimand or correct a staff member in front of a patient or another staff member.

5. **Clarify job descriptions and assign specific responsibilities.** Be sure to hold staff accountable for their performance. Resist the temptation to micromanage. Design daily, weekly, and monthly reports that clearly measure job performance. If you can, measure something, you can improve it. For instance, track your over the-counter collections, the number of new patients, dollars lost from last minute cancellations and no-shows, and scheduling and production goals. These are barometers of how successful your systems are and by definition how successful your staff members are in their specific jobs.
6. **Bonus/incentive plans work wonders.** This is based on the greatest management principle in the world. Very simply, if you reward behavior you want to receive, you will receive more of that behavior. Bonus incentives are win-win plans: staff morale is high because they share in increased profits, and you are happy because the office achieves higher levels of productivity and profitability. Plans can be designed to motivate individuals or the team as a whole. However, plans should not be written in stone. They have to be periodically tweaked as the practice grows to new levels.
7. **Learn to have productive and meaningful staff meetings.** Oftentimes, staff meetings disintegrate into gripe sessions with lots of finger-pointing, bruised egos, and nothing getting accomplished. To prevent this from happening, create an agenda of topics to be discussed and distribute it a week before the meeting, thus giving all participants ample time to prepare. Try to stay on message and don't get sidetracked. Written reports should be delivered by assignment. One 90 minute meeting every three weeks is probably adequate. Nothing short of a world war can cancel a staff meeting – everyone, especially the doctor, needs to respect the importance and sanctity of these meetings.
8. **Consistent morning huddles (10 to 15 minutes in duration.)** These can be essential for good communication between doctor and staff, and more importantly between the clinical staff and the administrative staff. The doctor should attend and participate in the huddle, which is led on a rotating basis (daily or weekly) by individual staff members. At the huddle, establish the three best times for emergencies to be seen, which patients need reminder calls, which hygiene patients need doctor exams, and review and fine-tune appointment schedules, as well as expected collection arrangements.
9. **Dealing with the Queen Bee syndrome.** There is often a talented, influential, and typically long-term employee who decides the rules of the office don't necessarily apply to her. Perhaps she consistently comes in late or disregards some of her assigned responsibilities. Since she is an important team member, the doctor avoids a personal confrontation and handles the problem by doing group therapy at staff meetings. "We all have to do our best to arrive at the office on time." Everyone knows that the comment is intended for one individual and not the other staff members. This technique is insulting to all the other responsible team members. Successful practices will not tolerate the behavior of the queen bee and as difficult as it may be, will make the decision to let this person go.
10. **Live by an updated, well-written, state-of-the-art policy manual.** Many practices never understand the logistics required to make the successful transition from a "mom and pop" operation to a major business. Vacation time, hours of operation, personal days, pregnancy leave, seniority, telephone use, internet use, workplace protection, dispute resolution, proper attire, body piercing – every possible contingency should be covered in detail. Favoritism should be avoided at all costs.

Assembling the perfect staff is a difficult and time consuming process. It doesn't happen overnight. In fact, even with a concerted effort to hire the best possible people, it could take a few years to find the

right blend of talent and personalities. So doctors, when you are fortunate enough to reach this happy day when all the pieces to the staff puzzle are in place, the last thing you want to happen is for key personnel to leave and have you be back to square one. I suggest that if you implement the strategies outlined in this article, your chances of retaining your team members will be greatly enhanced.

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