



IN A HAPPY PLACE— HOW TO BUILD A HARMONIOUS PRACTICE

Allan Walker

Does it really matter if your staff is happy at work? Should you even care if everyone likes each other, or if they consider coming to work the highlight of their day? While we all might want to work in an environment built on bliss, won't truly dedicated professionals always be at the top of their game, regardless of the mood or makeup of the workplace?

CASE STUDY

As a consultant, I am surprised when my client — a successful administrator who is usually thoughtful, compassionate, and proactive — blurts out that she “is fed up with all the petty bickering in the office and is thinking of replacing everyone and starting over.” Whoa, I think, what’s going on here? Additional probing reveals the genesis of the problem is a (likely) unique combination of related factors—the recent retirement of the practice’s longtime HR manager, the hiring of two

new employees, the promotion of a staff member who appears to be in over his head, and a long, dreary winter. “This is unusual,” I note. “You have a wonderful patient-focused staff. It looks to me like you are experiencing a perfect storm. Let’s analyze the situation closer and put a plan together. You’ll be fine.”

PROACTIVE STEPS

In this particular case, there is no need for drastic across-the-board measures. Even an experienced, well-trained staff will experience bumps in the road—and multiple personnel changes certainly provide challenges—but that does not mean the wheels have to come off. While you can't do anything about the weather—Mother Nature is not a paid member of your staff—you can take foundational steps and actions to ensure your practice is a great place to work.

To ensure your staff is happy and looks forward to coming to work every day, do the following:

Hire the right people. Practices that want happy, long-term employees need to develop recruitment and interviewing systems that accurately pinpoint likely candidates early in the process. While hiring is not an exact science and success is never guaranteed, it is possible to get a good “feel” if a candidate will be a happy addition by following thoughtful, standardized recruitment and interviewing processes that target personality as well as qualifications. To accurately judge candidates’ potential happiness levels, pay particular attention to their soft skills—or so-called people skills—which can pay big dividends for practices that clearly view providing medical care as a people business.

Emphasize onboarding. Happy employees are trained and coached from the start. Get your new employees off on the right foot by providing them the early training they need. From the moment they walk through the door on the first day, make sure

they are never left standing alone, wondering what to do or if they belong. Greet your new employees with a welcoming smile and a thoughtful, detailed, step-by-step onboarding plan that will guide them through those initial weeks (and beyond). Make sure new employees know exactly whom to approach if they have questions and be sure they know that no question is off limits. Your goal is to have your new employees go home at night looking forward to coming to work the next day.

Clearly define roles and responsibilities. Employees who know exactly what is expected of them are more likely to be happier than those who are left to stumble in the dark. Make sure there are no cloudy or grey areas. Every position in a practice should have a current job description that is reviewed regularly. Yes, flexibility and adaptability are essential success components in today's dynamic practice, but failure to have reality-based job descriptions opens the door to uncertainty, inefficiency, confusion, and unhappiness. Clearly define expectations for all positions/team members. Make sure all team members know they are expected to contribute, communicate, cooperate, problem solve, be respectful, and uphold organizational values.

Publicize your culture. Happy staff members need to know—and, ultimately embrace—your stated core values, beliefs, tenets, and fundamentals. These basics must be realistic, firmly held, meaningful, and complementary to the overarching goals and objectives of the practice. They also must be memorialized in writing and prominently discussed and displayed. A good start is a patient-focused mission statement all (staff and patients) can see. Make sure you—the leadership team—clearly convey to staff what you want your practice to

look and feel like. Together, these operating principles will form a practice culture to guide all staff members.

Promote a team approach. Happy employees believe that everyone brings something of value to the team and is appreciated for it. Practice leaders should be diligent in conveying a unified message that everyone is a respected part of the continuum of patient care and that no one is above or below another person. Leaders should point out that every member of the team has opportunities to enhance or detract from the patient experience. Also, leaders should take every opportunity to promote training and learning that build empathy for the roles of others in the practice. The more completely individuals understand why things happen a certain way or why things have to be that way, the more joy they will take in their contribution to the overall process.

Embrace learning and growth. Encouraging personal and professional growth is a proven approach to making staff happy. Regularly reminding team members that you wholeheartedly endorse appropriate-level training and advancement opportunities sends a clear message that you value and see potential in your team. Practice-based growth options can take a number of shapes—from establishing a mentor program for career pathing to setting a goal to certify everyone on staff. While not every member will choose to take advantage of these opportunities, they will appreciate the offer. Make staff professional growth a regular line item in the annual practice budget and strive to spend those funds. The bottom line is a more valuable, versatile, and happy team.

Lead by example. If you want a happy, well-functioning, and dedicated staff, you need to personally display the traits and characteristics you want staff to emulate. Be transparent in

your actions and style. Hone your management and communications skills to reflect your needs and those of your staff and practice. Let staff clearly understand that you value and reward results-based and morality-based qualities such as integrity, ethics, hard work, honesty, positive attitude, creativity, teamwork, self-motivation, goal setting, etc. Exemplify the image you want for your practice to help staff see how they should act and function.

Accentuate the positive. Everyone is happier working in a positive, encouraging atmosphere. As the leader, adopt the “high-road” approach and watch your people grow, both individually and professionally. A positive work environment, where success is acknowledged and rewarded, means employees will look forward to coming to work, wearing a smile, and gladly going the extra mile. Conversely, a consistently strained, negative, or tense work environment breeds dissatisfaction, complacency and, ultimately, failure.

FOCUS AND ATTENTION

Building and sustaining a happy, positive, work environment—one where your staff enjoys coming to work, is respectful of coworkers, and goes the extra mile to provide consistently outstanding patient care—requires regular focus and attention. Don't ever assume that issues will naturally work themselves out over time. Rather, creation and maintenance of a harmonious practice requires diligent effort by its leaders, in everything from hiring the right people to leading by example. *AE*



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