

Good Management Brings Top Performance

“Certain team members are not willing to pitch in. They do not pull their own weight.” “A long-term employee constantly complains about a new dental assistant. I ask her to speak directly with the person involved, but she never does.” “One staff member has been given substantial instruction and support, but she does not seem to be able to keep up with our busy practice.”

Sound familiar? Your foremost management challenges with a pediatric dental team typically entails complaints, criticism or conflict over position performance and responsibilities. This issue of *PPM News* will help you face these challenges in two steps: performance feedback provided weekly or monthly as needed to selected employees; and performance evaluation provided once a year to every employee.

Ongoing Performance Feedback

Whether your employees are stellar or substandard in performance, they must receive feedback on how they are doing. An honest yet tactful discussion of work behavior gives employees the opportunity to correct mistakes, improve performance and take pride in their jobs. If employees are not told about their strengths and areas of needed improvement, they will feel confused about their failures and unappreciated for their achievements.

Choose the proper time and place. If you begin your feedback with, “This has been bothering me for months,” then you have saved up information for far too long. Give the feedback as soon as is feasible after the behavior occurs. First, make sure you are calm – not still angry. Second, make sure the employee is receptive – not tired or busy. Third, get privacy. No one appreciates having a deficiency pointed out in front of a patient, parent or colleague. “Positive in public, but negative in private,” is a wise rule for effective feedback.

Consider asking permission. If the performance problem were severe, you naturally would skip this step. If the performance problem is mild to moderate, you can build rapport by asking the employee about their willingness to receive feedback at that particular moment. For example,

you might say, “I noticed that Mrs. Smith was giving you a tough time over insurance coverage for fluoride treatments. Shall we talk about ideas to handle outbursts like that from parents?”

Identify the problem. Specifically describe the behavior on which you are giving feedback. For example, you would say, “The recall cards went out four days behind schedule,” instead of, “You can’t seem to get anything done on time.” A statement such as, “You need to take patient charts more seriously,” is not as clear as, “Each patient’s chart must be completed carefully, including the procedure provided at the visit and the treatment recommended for the next visit. Several charts today were incomplete.”

Give examples. Your messages will be more understandable if you use relevant examples along with precise language. For example, “I reviewed the results of your work. Six of the last eight insurance reports you prepared had a number of errors in them. These examples show that your work has not met the needs and standards of this practice.”

Identify the results of the work behavior. Suppose parents and patients frequently overhear your receptionist making long personal phone calls at the front desk. Your message regarding the behavior and results might be, “I ask all employees to make personal phone calls from the back office, except in emergency situations. When patients and parents can listen in on our personal conversations, it lowers our efficiency and makes us seem less professional.”

Focus on the action, not the person. Your discussion must stay on work expectations, solutions and consequences. Do not stray into personalities, attitudes and motivations. But what if the employee gets defensive or overly personal? You could respond with, “Rather than focusing on personalities, I would like to focus on expectations for your performance – what you have done right and what could be done better.” Or you might state, “My feedback is not about you personally, but about your work performance. What counts in this practice is the work you do – how much and how well. When standards are not met in im-

portant areas, we must take action together to improve performance.”

Stay on task. Sometimes an employee will point a finger at other team members to excuse performance deficiencies. For example, “I don’t know why I’m the one in trouble. Susan shows up late for work and that’s why I get behind.” If a staff person says that others contribute to the problem, indicate that you will address other employees as needed.

An employee might attempt to deflect negative feedback by claiming success in other areas. For example, “You only notice my mistakes! Why don’t you ever appreciate the good work I do?” Your answer could be, “You have done really good work in some areas, and I will try to do a better job of acknowledging those contributions to the practice. However, your strong performance in some areas does not erase the serious shortcomings in other assignments. We need to find ways to help you perform well in *all* your job responsibilities.”

Describe the behavior you would like to see instead. Be as specific as possible; it may help to refer to the employee’s job description. You might state, “It is important to both of us that you do well in this office. Let’s carefully go over exactly where your performance should be better so that both of us are satisfied with the results of your efforts.”

Ask the employee for ideas on improving performance. Most of us think more highly of a solution if we have helped develop it. After you have carefully described the problem behavior and the preferred behavior, ask for suggestions on a course of corrective action. The employee might have valuable input on such topics as additional training or support.

Summarize and check for understanding. It is said that people have trouble hearing criticism during a certain phase of life: birth until death. An anxious or defensive employee does not listen at peak effectiveness. Briefly summarize the discussion for better understanding. You could say, “This meeting was to see how we can bring your performance up to a level we can both take pride in. If you are willing to improve, you can count on my support to help you be successful with patients and parents.” In conclusion, set a time for another meeting, perhaps several weeks, to review and acknowledge the progress.

Annual Performance Evaluation

An annual performance evaluation not only can promote higher quality work, it also can improve employee morale. It gives you and your employees a chance to openly discuss strengths and weaknesses in work performance.

Every employee should receive a performance review at least once each year. New employees should receive an appraisal after three months of employment; subsequent reviews should be conducted at the same time of year as the rest of the team. The performance evaluations should be the foundation for your decisions regarding raises, promotions and continued employment in the practice.

Performance reviews are based on the responsibilities detailed in the job descriptions, as well as on the standards of conduct expected by the practice. There are two basic approaches to conducting a performance evaluation. In the first approach, the pediatric dentist (or office manager or supervisor) completes the evaluation form then meets with the team member to discuss performance strengths and weaknesses. The evaluation form typically has a section for employee comments about the review. In the second approach, the pediatric dentist and the employee each completes an evaluation form. (The employee, thus, has the opportunity to evaluate personal performance.) The employee and pediatric dentist then meet for discussion of performance and objectives. In either approach, the pediatric dentist and employee should sign the evaluation form, and a copy should be placed in the employee’s personnel file.

What should a performance evaluation form contain? The top should feature the employee’s name and position, the supervisor’s name and position, and the time period covered by the review. Most evaluation forms contain a list of general performance characteristics or standards of conduct that supercede specific position responsibilities. You rate each characteristic on a scale of one to four, or one to five. For example, in the ADA sample evaluation form, a rating of (5) unsatisfactory performance; (3) meets job standards; and (1) substantially exceeds job requirements in all areas. In Marsha Freeman’s forms, the ranking translates to: (1) did not achieve expectations; (2) partially achieved expectations; (3) fully achieved expectations; and (4) exceeded expectations.

Sample performance characteristics or standards include:

- Attendance
- Communication skills
- Conflict management
- Management of work priorities
- Positive relations with children
- Punctuality
- Time management
- Workplace attitude
- Work quality
- Work quantity

The performance evaluation form should also feature a listing of the primary job responsibilities of the employee. Each responsibility is rated similarly to the performance characteristics, using a scale of one to four, or one to five.

Sample position duties for a front desk position include:

- Efficient scheduling of patient appointments
- Accurate entry of data into the computer system
- Effective management of patient charts and accounts
- Effective management of finances, collections and dental benefits

Sample position duties for a dental assistant position include:

- Radiography
- Sterilization
- Treatment support
- Management of emergencies
- Infection control and care of equipment
- Patient communication
- Parent education

The evaluation form should conclude with a space for the date and signatures of both the employee and pediatric dentist.

In summary, a program of ongoing performance feedback and annual performance evaluation will give your team clear information on practice expectations and constructive advice about upgrading the quality of their work. It will also serve to reduce staff confusion and conflicts over position responsibilities. Most importantly, it will promote employee satisfaction and help you further motivate your team.

Recommended Reading

1. American Dental Association, Council on Dental Practice. *Employee Office Manual: A Guide for the Dental Practice*. Chicago: American Dental Association, 1995.
2. Freeman, Marsha. *Standard Operating Procedures for Pediatric Dentists*. Santa Maria, California: Dental Communication Unlimited, 1995.
3. Moawad, Karen and Costain, Lynne Ross. *Managing Dental Office Personnel: A Management Tool for Structuring and Administering Personal Policies in the Dental Practice*. Tulsa, Oklahoma: PennWell Publishing, 1992.

PMMNews

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING NEWS IN PEDIATRIC DENTISTRY

Published six times a year as a direct membership benefit by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, 211 E. Chicago Avenue—Suite 700, Chicago IL 60611–2663, (312) 337-2169. Copyright©2003 by the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. All rights reserved. ISSN 1064-1203. aapdinfo@aapd.org, www.aapd.org

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