

When It Comes to Morale, You Get What You Give

By Toni Talbot, SPHR

Q *uestion:* I am an associate in a mid-sized office. A number of our employees seem dissatisfied, and I think this low morale impacts the way they treat our patients; it seems they

just don't care. I have also noticed that the practice owners do not seem to have a very positive relationship with the staff. They arrive in the morning, do not acknowledge the staff, and simply start seeing patients. They essentially keep the staff at a distance. Does this have anything to do with the low morale? Is there anything I can do to improve the morale?

Answer: Yes, the behavior of the practice owners in this case very well could have an impact on the employees' behaviors. It's a fine line we walk when we're in a position of leadership. I always say you can't be "friends" with your employees, but you should always be friendly.

Leadership needs to set the example. After all, staff members often treat patients the way they are treated as employees. A dentist's demeanor is sure to "rub off" onto his staff.

The owner of a practice ought to cheerfully greet employees each morning. He or she should ask about their families, and ask for and take their advice about the practice. Most importantly, owners should speak to them and listen to them in a respectful manner. The behavior of the staff models the behavior of the practice's leadership. The thinking goes like this: "If you don't care about me, why should I care about you or your patients?"

When you engage people, and acknowledge and respect them, they feel like they're part of the team and integral to the success of the business. They tend to take an ownership's view of the practice. This shows up in the way they treat patients, because they see them as *their* patients.

So, what can you, as an associate, do about the problem in your office? You should buck the trend and treat the staff respectfully, with courtesy, and with professionalism. I'm not saying you should become their best friend, but acknowledge them and show an interest in

their lives. I bet that the way they treat you and your patients will be different than the way they treat the other dentists and their patients.

You may also want to talk to the ownership of the practice, focusing on concerns you may have regarding the morale of staff and the impact this morale is having on patient care. I wouldn't recommend that you come out and tell them that their behavior is the cause of the morale problem. Obviously, this may not be a smart move for you politically. Instead, the focus should be on how morale can be improved. Before you have this discussion you need to consider what your relationship with the partners is like, and whether this is a topic you can breach. Proceed with care, because of course you are an associate, rather than a partner.

You may also want to work with the office manager. She may have more authority to address this issue. If the employees' dissatisfaction is leading to turnover, mistakes, lost patients, etc., this may equal a loss of revenue. As they say, "money talks," and this may be the catalyst needed to make low morale a priority to the ownership. The office manager may be able to very effectively demonstrate its financial impact.

At minimum, learn a lesson from this experience. Someday, *you* may be the owner of a practice. How your staff members behave, how they feel about their jobs, how they represent you to your patients is directly related to how you as the practice owner treat them.

You must always remember their humanity and treat them with respect and professionalism. I guess that could be said for almost all of our relationships, couldn't it? ♦



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