

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Doctor-Staff Relations: Don't Underestimate the Power of "Hello"

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Does this sound like your day? You arrive at the office, look at the schedule, think about the number of reports you need to write; then you take a deep breath and dive right in. The day is filled with patients and patient related actions (exams, patient care, reports, calls, email, etc.).

The staff is somewhat helpful but not happy. You'll have to address this when you have time. Right now performance is not up to where it needs to be to get everything done so it's time to be a little stern with the staff or just do everything yourself.

Suddenly a staff person you thought was a real team member gets another job. You feel betrayed. What happened? What happened was that in the crush of your day to day, you neglected some very simple, basic steps which would have made you, as well as your staff, much happier.

For example, years ago I was brought in to help a doctor who had a huge problem with his staff. He said they weren't happy and he didn't know how to fix it. When I interviewed the staff, I found out that their day revolved around the doctor's mood. One staff person said, "I can tell how the day is going to go based on what happens when the doctor walks in the door."

This made me very curious. How could they tell instantly when the doctor walked in the door if it was going to be a bad day? As I interviewed the staff, the answer was obvious. When the doctor walked into the practice on some days he said hello and had a smile on his face, other days he looked very serious and didn't look at any of them, much less say hello. And that's when they knew it was definitely going to be a bad day.

What was even more interesting was when I interviewed the doctor (the managing partner in a million dollar practice). I asked him what happened

when he arrived at his office. He said that as he walked into the office all he could think about was how he was responsible for everyone's livelihood. He was carrying this heavy burden reflected upon his face as he walked back to his office to plan the day. The staff thought he was mad at them, when in fact he cared so much about them that he was worried about how he could maintain the growth of the practice so they could keep their jobs in a tough economy.

The solution was very straight forward. As the manager of his staff, he needed to be more than just the doctor. In the crush of day to day activities, he needed to do several very simple, basic steps that would make him, and his staff, much happier.

I shared with the doctor the impact his attitude was having on the staff. We agreed that from that point forward his first action of the day would be to greet the staff individually when he walked into the office in the morning. Then, once he was in his personal office, he could review his schedule and think about his management and marketing issues.

Now, when he walks in the door he greets each staff person, asks how they're doing and periodically asks about their kids.

When I later asked the office manager how things were going, she said, "It's a miracle! Every day is a great day!" The staff is much happier, all because the doctor was now saying "Hello!" And, yes, the doctor is much happier too.

You create miracles in your practice with patients on a daily basis; but when it comes to your staff, many doctors neglect simple but important actions that can also create miracles. It is easy to lose sight of the obvious and make problems appear bigger than they are. In this type of environment, simple organizational problems are often misinterpreted as personality conflicts.

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There was another office I consulted where the doctor had brought in a partner, let's call her Dr. T, who was now in charge of the optical. The optician somehow never seemed to do what Dr. T asked him to do. Dr. T was convinced that he didn't like her.

When I investigated the situation, it turned out that a new form that Dr. T had designed to make the office run more smoothly wasn't being filled out by the optician. So I started with something very basic. I asked the optician where the form was located. Then I asked him where he was sitting when he would need to fill out the form. You guessed it – the form was on the wrong desk!

When a staff attitude problem arises, it is time to dig. You need to ask the staff member questions. There are always two sides to every story. For example, say you are implementing a new system. The first week everyone is doing what they should and using the new system, but the second week, it drops out and they go back to their old ways.

Don't assume your staff are plotting against you or incompetent. It is time to ask questions about the new system and why it was dropped. Enlist the aid of the staff in making the system work. Find the reasons why the staff went back to the "old way of doing things" and see where the new system might need improvement. In some cases, the system may actually cause more problems than it solves, in which case it might be better to just go back to your previous methodology.

Involving the staff in finding solutions for things not only improves their participation but also morale. In many cases, they come up with better solutions because they are more experienced with the problems in their areas. They will also be more motivated to implement the solution if they had a part in developing that solution.

Managing your staff doesn't have to be difficult. Part of a manager's job is to empower the staff and motivate them to solve problems. Motivating your staff is always a key ingredient in management.

Take time for a huddle! Another key to keeping everyone motivated is having all staff on the same page with you regarding what's going to happen that day. If you can arrange your schedule so you have a few minutes at the beginning of your day to review

the schedule with your staff, discuss how things are going in each department, and talk about any patient or practice situations; this helps everyone to be a team player. It also empowers your staff to accomplish more throughout the day and provide you with a smoother running schedule.

Most people who work in a health care office are there because they want to help people. It is your job as the office's leader and manager to empower everyone on your staff to do their jobs. It's also your job to help keep staff morale high. Something as simple as saying hello and meeting with your staff first thing in the morning can energize them to get through the day with a smile on their face.

While there are times when you will run into staff situations that are more complex, you will find they happen less often when you are spending time each day to improve staff coordination, empowerment and morale. The main way to accomplish this is to schedule time each day to communicate with your staff. And, when you arrive in the office, be sure to say "Hello!" and smile!

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