

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Doctor-Staff Relations: How to Correct Your Staff

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Have You Ever Had This Happen?

When you are in the exam room all day, you know that your time to see what is happening in the rest of the office is limited. So when you have a chance to observe what's happening, you must quickly look to see what's wrong, so you can correct it rapidly.

You look around the office, and overhear a conversation with a patient that puts your hair on edge. You quickly step in, take over and talk with the patient to figure out what's wrong. You find out that the patient is requesting a discount (above and beyond what your office policy allows for) and your staff is correctly insisting it can't be done. The patient is obviously upset. You survey the area, and can see that there are a number of patients who would be able to overhear if this patient spoke loudly. So you tell the patient, not to worry, that you will let her have the discount she requested.

Then you run back to the exam room to see your next patient. What you don't see is the aftermath of your actions. The patient looks at your staff with a self-righteous glare, and your staff feels like you just told the whole world they were wrong. Your staff gets more and more upset as the transaction wraps up.

At the end of your day, that member of your staff either stomps out of the office, or hands you her resignation saying she refuses to work under these conditions. What happened? What conditions is she talking about?

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Getting Information

As a health care professional your clinical training has taught you how to detect a problem very rapidly. While there is tremendous value in being able to do that, it's what you do with that information that's key.

Jumping into a situation and "solving the problem" without sufficient information can be deadly.

Yes, there is the old adage that the customer is always right. However, you have to solve the problem in such a way that your patient *and* your staff are right (unless they have committed an error of such a level that you are seriously considering firing them and the patient needs to hear that the staff was wrong, but that's a different approach to a different situation, and will be addressed in another article).

In the above situation, you have two choices that will serve your office and staff better in the long run than just intervening without consideration of the consequences. The first choice is to see if there is another staff person who is within ear shot of the situation who you can talk with to get an update on what happened and then make your decision. The second choice is to ask the patient if she could excuse you for a moment and talk with your staff person (in private) to find out the whole story. Now you can make your decision and guide your staff appropriately.

Supporting Your Staff

When you contradict or correct your staff in front of patients it undermines their authority. You have empowered them to do a job for you, and then you walk in and take away their authority. Most people who work in a health care practice are there because they love helping people. When you take away their authority, it's as though you have slapped them in the face. As far as they are concerned you just told the entire office they were wrong! You would be humiliated if someone did that to you.

Another approach could be to say either:

“Mrs. Jones, Cindy is correct. That is our office policy. We have never done what you are requesting, but, in your situation, I would like to approve it. Cindy, can you take care of that?” or

“Mrs. Jones, Cindy is correct. That is our office policy. We have never done what you are requesting, but, in your situation, I would like to (and offer a discount on something else the patient needs)...”

The key here is that you are telling the patient your staff person is *right* and you are empowering the staff person to correct the situation in a way that has a better chance to also make the patient happy, with your expressed approval.

What To Do Afterwards

Now, you don't stop there. After your next patient, make a point of speaking with Cindy. Let her know *why* you did what you did and *ask* her what happened. If, in getting her information, you realize that you made a mistake, *apologize*. Then, schedule a meeting to review the situation and figure out how else the problem could have been solved so you can establish policy for the future.

For example, let's say that Mrs. Jones, in this scenario, just told you in the exam room that she is telling all her friends to come see you, but you haven't had a chance to tell Cindy. “Mrs. Jones, Cindy is correct. That is our office policy. We have never done what you are requesting, but, *as a special thank you for telling your friends about our office*, I would like to approve it.”

You would then develop a system to ensure that your staff knows when they are working with a patient who is actively referring patients to your practice. While every patient should be treated like gold, bending the rules or policies should be reserved

for very special cases, and it must be approved by the doctor. Creating a policy that gives your staff the guidelines on what to do when a patient is demanding you make an exception to your existing policy would be a good step.

Your Office Policies

Also keep in mind that your office policies are there to give your staff stability and predictability. They know how to do their job and they know what you expect. The policies are there so you don't have to stop and answer a thousand questions which could easily be answered if the staff knew the policies. If you constantly contradict the policies you have given them, they will get frustrated and confused because they will have no idea what you really want them to do.

In Summary

The most important point here is that your staff responds best to honest praise and acknowledgement of a job well done. They don't respond to constantly being told they've done something wrong without ever being told what they did right. When you need to correct your staff, take the time to do it right. Meet with them to review the error, find out what happened, determine if anything needs to be done to correct the current situation and discuss how it should have been handled so they know what to do in the future. Your staff is one of your greatest assets. Proper training, correction and enhancement will pay off a hundredfold.

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