

The value of high staff morale

In 2012 the BDA conducted research into staff morale and motivation of dentists in the salaried primary dental care setting. That research discovered that more than half of people questioned said their morale was either low or very low. So why is it important to reverse this and develop a setting where morale and motivation can flourish? David Westgarth asked BDA Practice Management Consultant **Natalie Birchall** for her advice – and some suggestions on how to let it grow.

With the demands placed on general dental practices by patients but also the GDC, NHS and bodies like the CQC in England, good staff morale is very, very important. Having happy content employees who are motivated means they are more likely to work hard for the practice, which will show when patients visit. They are also likely to stay longer, which helps to improve efficiency and lowers staff turn-over. If you have a revolving door when it comes to staff retention, you are constantly in a hiring cycle, which is not a constructive use of time or money.

‘If you create a happy practice or work in one, people will want to work for you and dentists will look to stay. The longer staff stay in one location means everyone will know their role, build rapport with patients and improve the delivery of care. It’s a win for everyone.’

‘Everything that applies to dentists also applies to an associate. If you have one who is highly skilled, can bring two or three areas of expertise to clinic and is great with patients, it is clearly beneficial to keep them happy and on board. Matters of finance can play a role too, from both practice owner and associate point of view. At the end of the day they are generating money for the practice.’

‘In terms of team building holding social events, now that summer is here is an idea worth considering, but consider everyone’s tastes. Going to a restaurant might be good but a team member might not like a certain type of food, so canvas everyone’s opinion. On the other hand you may plan something more active, say a karaoke night, as your team may love the idea and camaraderie of belting out favourite hits together but watch out in case someone would find the whole event too embarrassing.’

More than just cakes

Keeping staff morale high isn’t about buying cakes at the end of the day. Practice owners, managers, receptionists and dentists all have their role to play. Chris Barrow from 7connections believes team harmony and staff morale starts right at the top.

‘You have to differentiate between management and leadership. You can lead people and manage a system, but you can’t do the opposite’, he said. ‘People require clear leadership, so make sure every member of your team knows exactly where you want to go as a practice and how you will get there. You may not like to think it, but it’s only natural for some people to think ‘what’s in it for me?’ It’s a very

important question, and the answers help to map out your clear, defined vision for making the practice a successful one.

‘Mapping out that goal and focus means you have to communicate it. Talking and communicating is so important in any industry, and dentistry is no exception. I often tell people the first thing they should do is just talk! Have a daily huddle, a weekly review, a monthly update. Every quarter take the team out of the office for training and every year celebrate. These things are so crucial to forming the backbone of success. I have a strongly-held belief that all problems exist in the absence of conversation. It’s applicable to all forms of life – home, relationships, work. I have so many clients call up asking me for their help, telling me team morale needs to improve. My first question is always when was the last time you sat down as a team after a day in clinic and talked about how it went, what issues



they had or did not have. So often they can't answer, which could be why we see such low morale in certain areas.'

Natalie added: 'I think that is absolutely right. So often we receive calls seeking advice as they want to change something in their employee's contract which they're not going to like. We always recommend and advise them to take their time, explain all the reasoning to the employee, hold meetings, give them an opportunity to think about the suggested changes and have an open door policy so if they do have questions they can ask them.'



Rigid or flexible?

But what about when staff start to push their luck?

Natalie explained: 'If, for example, a member of staff needs to take a day off at the last minute to deal with something personal, which may be against

the practice's leave policy, you have a choice to make. Look at the situation, do the circumstances fall into the rules on compassionate leave or time off to deal with domestic emergencies? If not you will probably be entitled to enforce the practice's leave policy and refuse the request, or you can be lenient and allow them to have last minute time-off. There is nothing wrong with either approach, and both do depend on the type of manager you wish to be, but whatever decision you take will have a longer term impact.'

With his 20+ years in the business, Chris believes these kinds of incidents can be solved with one thing – telling the truth.

'This one is interesting, because from experience it's a common problem in practice. It is the only way to dispel gossip, rumours and problems festering. In the absence of conversation, it is only natural

for people to start making their own assumptions and interpretations. Lies are evil, disruptive and only ever a negative, which can destroy team unity to the point of no return. A de-motivated group will not help you achieve success. Too often I have found performance and behaviour of some staff has fallen well below expectations yet management are turning a blind eye. The short-term pain of confrontation is taking precedence over the long-term gain of dealing with the situation. It's human nature to do so, but the successful teams and happy teams tackle problems head-on.'

One of the best ways to encourage and develop staff morale is team building or networking events. It could range from having a staff barbecue if the practice is performing well to taking the entire team to a dental conference and exhibition and having an evening away. Whatever event you choose to run, Natalie believes it is important to remind all employees of their responsibilities from the outset.

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'This is an area where we get so many calls. Tribunal cases are often formed during these events, I dealt with a case where a team trip to the bowling alley ended in animosity after one team member behaved obnoxiously about beating their colleagues. It is easy to relax after a drink or two, so from an owner or manager's point of view, be very mindful of what relationship you want to have with staff. The same applies to staff. You may get on with the boss or you may not, but whichever camp you find yourself in, it is important to remember you will see these people on Monday morning.

'That's not to say victories of any form should not be celebrated – quite the opposite. The projection of a happy practice

to patients gives potential customers reassurance and a reason to visit.'

Praise and appraise

As we have covered many times in these pages, the value of appraisals cannot be underestimated. Their purpose is to review and improve performance, regardless of current ability. According to Chris, if a practice wants good morale and harmony, these sessions should also be about identifying strengths.

'The great teams are those who utilise their skills to the max. Every member of the team has a strong suit, and appraisals are great for identifying those. If someone isn't performing well and you don't have appraisals, they won't learn and morale will remain low. If someone isn't performing well but you're in constant communication with them and have identified a strength of theirs, it will benefit everyone. For some people it is communication and for some it's analysing figures. The key is to position those people where their skills have the most impact. You wouldn't have a great communicator stuck in the back office, and likewise you wouldn't have someone great with numbers front-of-house. This idea comes from Strategic Coach in Toronto and is a fantastic way of maximising the potential of every member of staff.'

So what one message would both Chris and Natalie offer practice teams on how to improve team morale?

'Allow colleagues to bond' Natalie said. 'In the dental team throughout the day pretty much everyone in the team operates in their silo. It's not your traditional office environment, so social events allow time for that.'

Chris added: 'You will spend a lot of time at work, and if you can't find humour and fun in it then over a period of time it will become unsustainable. The great teams know how to party and have fun. There's camaraderie about their day, but when it's time to work and toe the line, they can do that with aplomb. Every team is different, but these tips will definitely bring about a change in atmosphere and environment.' ♦

Details on how to go about varying contracts are in the Variation of contract section of BDA Advice Employing staff.