

The Impact of Leadership on Practice Culture

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One of the most difficult challenges practice leaders face is how to prioritize time and energy. On any given day, there are so many issues that demand our attention. How, then, are we supposed to carve out the time required to focus on practice culture? I would argue that, in fact, this focus should take precedence over all else because, when practice culture is optimized, pretty much everything else falls into place. Here are some considerations for creating a healthy practice culture.

1. Leadership

The key players in establishing an optimum practice culture are the practice leaders. You need to invest in your team and role model the attributes you want to achieve for your practice. Leaders need to be supportive, engaged, friendly and compassionate. You must treat all staff equally and take the time to mentor staff wherever needed.

2. Communication

Effective practices place a high value on optimum communication. Leaders need to be transparent, available, honest, and timely in communicating important information to staff. No one should be left out of the communication loop—group texts, weekly staff meetings and morning huddles are great strategies. Most importantly, communication needs to be ongoing. The minute you stop communicating effectively, things start to fall apart.

3. Staff Engagement

Practices that focus on keeping staff engaged have far less turnover, as well as greater productivity and teamwork. As the practice leader, you are

essential to staff engagement. First and foremost, involve your staff in all decisions that impact the practice. They know a lot about what works and what doesn't work. That doesn't mean you always have to implement your staff's suggestions but be open to their perspectives. As the practice leader, keep a light touch on the reins and try to avoid micromanagement. Show appreciation for everyone's hard work—that costs nothing and means the world to people. Consider team-building activities outside of work time, but first solicit feedback to see what your staff would like to do (and if this is something that they would value).

4. Maintain Staffing Levels

It's essential that you maintain optimum staffing levels. Nothing demoralizes and burns out staff faster than being understaffed. Of course, recruiting new staff is a challenge right now, which is why keeping the staff you already have is so important. Make sure your rates of pay are competitive; salaries have increased greatly since the pandemic. Consider hiring bonuses as well as referral bonuses for your staff. Be open to flexible staff schedules—it can be a chore to manage, but work-life balance is important to employees. Make sure you are offering comprehensive benefits—that can give you a recruiting advantage over other practices. Employees are looking for paid sick time, paid vacation and holidays and health and dental insurance. Consider other benefits such as 401(k) plans (and consider providing a match) and end-of-year bonuses.

5. Pay Attention to the Work Environment

Your staff spend a lot of their time working in your practice, so make sure the physical environment is clean, organized, and attractive. In fact, let staff make changes to the office. It should be a place they would be proud to show off to family and friends. Make sure all equipment is regularly maintained and in good working order. Make sure your electronic dental record system is set up to work

optimally and that all staff are trained (and periodically retrained) to maximize its functionality. Make sure you have policies and procedures defining all aspects of practice operations and that all new staff are thoroughly oriented to how the practice works (and given time to become comfortable in their new positions).

6. Prioritize Respect

Create a culture of respect within the practice. That includes a zero-tolerance policy for rudeness on the part of patients, staff and leaders. Everyone, regardless of who they are, is treated equally. Gossip, drama and backbiting are not tolerated. When/if conflicts arise, they are dealt with quickly and fairly.

7. Emphasize the Value of Teamwork

Make sure to also prioritize teamwork. The expectation is that everyone pitches in to help out wherever needed, and that includes you as the practice leader.

8. Make Work Fun

Most importantly, don't take yourself too seriously and make sure you and your staff remember to have fun each and every day!



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