



successful staff management

Do you manage your staff effectively? Valerie Steward outlines some steps you can take to ensure that your workforce delivers maximum value to the practice.

■ **How effectively is your practice managed? Do staff produce work to the required standard? In my experience, partners sometimes ignore the employee development needs of their practice, even at those times when quality staff are hard to find.**

what am I doing?

Everyone needs to know what is expected of them – hence some form of job description for all levels of staff (and even partners) setting out core responsibilities is crucial.

how am I doing?

All staff need to be kept appraised of how well, or badly, they are doing. You cannot simply complain about an employee's poor performance; do something about it. You should ensure that your practice employs a proper appraisal process and undertake interviews at least annually. The appraisal should be undertaken by someone who has

the authority to make decisions and at least an hour needs to be allocated to undertake the process properly.

the appraisal process

The staff member should be asked to undertake a self-assessment first. Most people are their own worst critics and will often be more honest about their shortcomings than their assessors will be. The appraiser needs to review the self-assessment and then complete their own assessment of the individual. This will then be discussed with the individual and an action plan and training programme devised.

Before the interview takes place the appraiser needs to plan the issues that will need to be addressed during the interview and what outcome they wish to have.

the rules

The rules for undertaking an appraisal interview are very similar to those for any interview. All the following issues need to be considered:

- if more than one person is involved in the interview make sure the seating position is comfortable – do not have the person sitting directly opposite the appraising team
- offer a drink and follow the lead, if the appraisee says yes you should have one as well. Let them have a chance during the interview to drink it as well!
- spend the first few minutes setting the scene and allowing the appraisee to get over any nerves – do not launch straight in with criticism – try and say something positive
- once you have set the scene make sure you allow the appraisee to talk
- keep on track – make sure you cover all the issues contained in your plan
- make notes to ensure that an accurate action plan can be devised
- if you want the appraisee to be honest it is often better for someone other than the direct supervisor to undertake the interview, although you would need to ensure that adequate information had been received from the supervisor
- allow plenty of time, especially if difficult feedback will be delivered
- take the appraisee's concerns seriously, but do not make rash decisions or promises if they raise an issue that you were not expecting. Take a note and say that you will come back to it at a later date

- obtain feedback from other staff and clients on an individual's performance
- try to start and end on a high note
- be firm and fair – do not be afraid to tell the individual that there are areas of performance that need to be improved – you should be encouraging staff to perform at a level that exceeds expectations not one that is just passable
- when criticising a member of staff be sure to criticise their behaviour/ performance, not their personality – they can change the former but not the latter
- try to isolate the appraisals from the pay review – you are appraising past performance whereas you pay for future expected performance. Ideally you will do the appraisals three months before the pay review – this way you can tell an individual at the appraisal what their salary is likely to be provided they meet agreed targets identified at the interview
- schedule the interviews well in advance and treat them in the same way you would a meeting with your best client – if the staff do not believe you are taking the process seriously neither will they.

the desired outcome

The end result should be a staff member who understands what is expected of them, what areas require improvement and the steps the firm will take to assist (such as training). They should also know what will happen if the targets are met (salary increase, more responsibility etc) and what will happen if they are not (disciplinary procedures, lack of pay increase etc).

dealing with difficult staff

No matter how careful you are, most firms will have at least one member of staff who is difficult. This individual may be good at their job but have an attitude problem. This can have a very damaging effect on staff morale and if the staff do not see action being taken, they may ultimately vote with their feet – leaving you with the awkward one!

How do you control this type of situation without becoming embroiled in office politics? I suggest you:

- make sure that the staff are all aware of the standards of behaviour expected of them
- try to 'tune in' to the office grapevine so that you are aware of any undercurrents and can do something if you believe that things are getting out of control

- do not be afraid of confronting the office bully if necessary; better a good technician leaves than you have a damaging atmosphere
- be firm when a member of staff needs to improve performance or change behaviour. Give them targets and, if these are not met, invoke the disciplinary process
- encourage the staff to have events out of the office to promote camaraderie
- listen to the staff at their appraisals (see above) and follow up on any undercurrents that become clear.

rewarding quality staff

A happy workforce is a more productive workforce. Tips to ensure quality staff are rewarded include:

- communication is key to ensuring that an individual feels valued
- you do not have to pay people a lot of money for them to feel they have been rewarded. People need to know that they are valued and play an important role in the organisation. If they do it can be worth a lot of money!
- public thanks works very well to make people believe that they are important
- remember that job titles can be a reward, even relatively junior people can be status conscious
- make sure that the appraisal system is maintained and that staff are given adequate feedback on their performance
- in larger practices consider having grades at different levels of staff so that good staff are aware that they will be receiving a larger salary
- consider the payment of bonuses, having a bonus pool that is allocated across the staff based on performance rather than salary and length of service
- try to remember that staff rarely leave because of money – provided that you are paying market rate they will only start looking for something else if they have other issues.

conclusion

Make sure that you have a proper staff strategy and that you spend enough time and effort ensuring that your team is as good as it can be. ■

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