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Sweet and Sour: the joys of hiring and firing

For 12 years, I have been addressing dental office issues. The most problematic issue is always the staff and the blending of different personalities with different levels of achievement and expectations. Many dentists believe that their office should reflect a world very different from the world at home or from the world they grew up in without realizing that they re-create the same trauma or paradise on an unconscious level. There are a lot of aspects to running a business that can be debated endlessly because of their relativity, but the one subject that cannot be debated is that the boss chooses the staff and creates the environment he/she works in. Thus, the boss, the dentist is responsible for the makeup of the staff, the combination of personalities and the level of joy or bitterness that is present in the office on a daily basis.

Over the course of my career working in dental offices, most of the people who require practice management services seem to always fall into the same category of management style. They hire the person with the most experience, then put their head in the sand and hope for the best. I am not surprised when I review the staff with a dentist and ask him/her to rate each employee in terms of proficiency at their job and then I ask him/her to rate each staffer on a scale of how much they like working with them. Many dentists running dysfunctional businesses work with people who are good at their jobs but whom they do not like to work with. They keep them because they feel that they will lose business if they let that person go, so they elect to suffer. The belief that one must suffer is a belief that gets started in childhood and has nothing to do with the adult world of business and the decision to make money.

Here is a piece of psychological information that will probably challenge your basic beliefs about people and how they interact, but if taken seriously, can open up a new door into how you manage your practice. The brain organizes reality by processing two sets of information. One set of information concerns your "self" and what you feel, do and think. The second set of information concerns what "other people" feel, do and think. At any one point in time, the brain is collecting the information and summarizing it in an effort to establish its place in the reality of your world. In practical terms, what this means is that you actually feel, react to and see what you want to feel, react to and see. In other words, you have some control, or at least more control over your reality and your working environment than you give yourself credit for.

In the process of coaching, we discuss the staff, and we discuss proficiency and likability. When we come across a person whose proficiency and likability are deficient, the best advice is to let them go in the best interest of the staff and the best interest of the boss, who wants to feel good when she/he goes to work every day. To this effort, most dentists are terrified of firing and then hiring, because they do not have a technique that is time tested and proven to work. Remember, they just look for the person with most experience and hope for the best.

Going forward, you might want to evaluate your staff based on performance and likability and insist on working with a group of people that you like rather than a staff that you are ambivalent about. You accomplish this by letting go of the people who do not measure up to your professional expectations for proficiency and likability. Rather than facing this dreaded effort with trepidation, make it easy on yourself. During these times of economic recession, we have good reason to be concerned about letting employees go because jobs are hard to find, but your job as the boss is not to take care of all the other adults in the world. Your highest priority is to make yourself the number one priority, which of course makes your family the number one priority. To this extent, you can create the staff of your dreams a reality by buying your piece of mind.

To those people that you choose to let go, buy their acquiescence and cooperation, while in the process buying your peace of mind. Tell them the truth. Tell them that you're making some changes in the office, you have to let them go, and offer them four weeks of severance pay to find another job. Pay them to leave so that you can feel good about your decision to feel better about your business. You don't have to suffer longer than you choose to. You may be surprised at their response to your generosity.