Feedback – seize the moment

By Sally McKenzie

Catch your employees doing something right and tell them every day. On-going feedback is absolutely essential in any business environment, but in a small business, particularly a dental practice, in which the success or failure of each system hinges on the performance of a small collection of employees, it is critical. Feedback from the doctor and other members of the team is the only means individuals have to better understand what they can do to improve their own performance. And it’s one of the most essential resources for continuously assessing what is working and what isn’t in your practice.

Most employees genuinely want to perform well. They not only want to meet your expectations, they want to exceed them. As the dentist, you’re the coach on this team and the members are looking to you for guidance and direction. A practice environment that welcomes and encourages feedback not only helps the doctor shape his/her team, it also enables the dentist to better understand what might be interfering in an employee’s ability to meet specific objectives. Most importantly, it creates a climate in which the team as a whole can examine and solve problems, address challenges, and openly discuss what could be done to improve the performance of specific systems.

Follow these eight steps and use feedback effectively to shape your high performance practice.

1. Seize the moment. Verbal feedback can be given at any time, but it is most effective at the time the employee is doing something wrong or right. It can even be given in the belief that you either want to praise or correct. If Jennifer, the hygienist, reinforced your recommended treatment plan with the ever-relluctant Mr. Sullivan, by gently convincing him that now that the kids are all through school, the time is right to move forward on those implants that he had long been considering, tell her.

2. Keep your feedback specific. Rather than walking by and saying “Great job!” tell the staff member exactly what she/he did well. When congratulating Jennifer on her expert handling of Mr. Sullivan explain to her what she did to deserve your praise. Express your sincere appreciation and emphasize the value of her contribution to the overall success of the practice.

3. Give constructive feedback in private. If Mrs. Rakers is asking about veneers and Carla, your new assistant, makes an off-hand comment about the expense, she needs constructive guidance on how similar inquiries are to be handled in the future. Being new, she may not comprehend the impact of what she perceives to be innocuous comments and how those can have a profound influence on patient decisions to accept or deny recommended treatment. However, do not correct her in front of the patient.

Make time to speak privately with Carla to provide constructive feedback. Focus on the issue and avoid analyzing the feedback. The goal of constructive feedback is correction and motivation not demoralization. You would not say, “Carla, your patient communication is poor.” Rather, you would constructively explain to her how you want patient inquiries regarding treatment to be handled in the future. In addition, determine whether Carla’s comment reflects a perception that exists among the rest of the team. Do you need to consider scheduling a mini-clinic during the next regularly staff meeting to educate the team on the benefits of specific treatments such as veneers or implants? Does Carla need a clearer understanding of the practice’s treatment financing options? In other words, how can this opportunity to give feedback be used to best educate and help the team grow into a stronger, more committed team player. Additionally, can it be used to educate and shape other members of the team as well.

4. Don't save feedback. It’s not uncommon for doctors to save up 12 months of what should be day-to-day communication for the annual performance review session with the employee. The dentist meets with the team members one-on-one for 15 minutes once a year. Doctor tells the employee that she/he is doing a fine job but could use a little improvement in a couple of areas. The employee walks away with a vague notion that he/she may need to make some corrections but she/he isn’t really clear on exactly what needs to be changed or fixed.

Then the doctor can’t comprehend why the employee doesn’t seem able to maintain any lasting improvements in her/his performance. The employee may have thought that she might temporarily fix those areas the dentist pointed out as lacking and get better for a short time, but, before long, they fall back into the same poor habits. Feedback is an ongoing discussion about the employee’s continuous improvement. Giving it only on an annual basis is a bit like committing to an exercise program one day a year and wondering why your pants are still too tight for the remaining 366. Make it a daily exercise, not a yearly one.

5. Money is NOT feedback. Many dentists believe that the annual pay raise constitutes feedback. They reason that if the employee is getting more money the team member should automatically know that their performance is fine. What dentists often realize is that feedback and the annual salary review are and should be completely different actions and conversations. The salary review is a once-a-year discussion about the employee’s current compensation. Feedback, as you’ve now learned, is an ongoing dialogue about the employee’s performance that is designed to motivate, encourage, and direct the employee regularly and, when necessary, to give the employee make performance corrections. Money is not feedback, and it’s not the motivator you may think it is.

In fact, a recent article in Fortune magazine reported that the top three workplace motivators for the GenX workforce, those employees born between 1964 and 1977, are not cash, money, and greensbacks. They are “positive relationships with colleagues, challenging work, and continuous opportunities for learning.” Money was ranked third from the bottom on the list of 15 job characteristics. Certainly, for many dentists it’s much easier to give a few extra percentage points on that annual salary review and call it “feedback.” But don’t expect it motivate your employees to achieve their best.

6. No news is NOT good news to your employees. The only feedback to rank lower on the scale than negative feedback is no feedback at all. If employees only hear from you when things are not right, they become resentful and defensive. And when there is no feedback teams are left to wonder about how they are doing in the eyes of the doctor. They begin to fill in the gaps themselves. You may be perfectly happy with an employee’s performance, so you never mention anything. All is well from your standpoint. However, the employee may perceive your silence as quiet discontent. They feel their contribution is not valued and are more likely to explore other employment options where they believe they can improve the success of the business and grow as a professional.

Employees want to know where they stand. They want to know how they are doing on an ongoing basis. Constructive feedback given regularly helps employees continuously fine tune and improve the aspects in which they carry out their responsibilities. It’s also the dentist’s most vital tool in shaping and guiding average employees into effective, high-performing team members.

7. Use constructive feedback to nip problems in the bud. If you enable in ongoing constructive feedback, you are not addressing performance issues as they occur. Moreover, you are continuously setting the tone for how you expect your employees to carry out their duties and interact with you and other patients. If you look the other way or postpone addressing an employee’s poor attitude, poor performance, or failure to follow office protocols and policies, your actions – or lack of action – convey to the rest of the staff that you either don’t care or you’re willing to accept poor performance. Inaction sends all the wrong messages to the staff and undermines your credibility as well as your authority in your practice.

Address problems promptly and if necessary, create a plan of action with the employee to help them measure improvements in their performance. Be clear about the changes you expect and provide a schedule for the employee to make those changes/improvements. Failing to communicate the plan is key in using feedback effectively to address problem, and in some cases, the employee may need additional training in order to meet performance objectives. Give them the guidance, the training, the tools, and the feedback necessary to rise to the challenge.

8. Feedback is a total team effort. It is not the doctor’s job alone. The dentist may be the head coach, but the entire dental team can constructively guide one another, provided guidelines are established and each member of the team commits to be open to feedback. Too often supervisors and coworkers are so overly concerned about offending a staff member they shun opportunities to give feedback. Ideally, the culture of the practice should encourage open feedback among the team members to continuously improve systems and patient services.

Verbal, on-the-spot feedback should be the goal, and the practice environment should encourage positive feedback and openly provide constructive feedback when necessary. Failing to give feedback fails both the individual team member and the practice as a whole.

About the author

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