Prepare for the fire and you'll be spared the burn

By Sally McKenzie, CMG

A few months back a major American company was in severe financial difficulties. The surge of publicity wasn’t because it had just made some note- worthy changes in its world of commerce, or because it had achieved record profits, or because it had given a large donation to a needy organization. No, this company was in the news for the manner in which it handled that least favorite of all exchanges between management and employees—the firing. Instead of face-to-face dismissals, the human resources department sent email notices out to those whose jobs were being eliminated, sparking a vast reduction in force. Needless to say, management and employees didn’t stand a chance. Admittedly, the thought of letting electronic communication tools handle this potentially ugly task has at least some level of appeal, particularly for those who dislike confrontation, which would encompass a large percentage of dentists. It’s fair to say that employee dismissal is the most anxiety ridden of all practice management responsibilities, and many doctors will tolerate considerable interpersonal pain and suffering, deleterious effects on the team at large, and outright misery just to do it.

I recommend that you avoid firing employees by email. It’s unpleasant or difficult. Dealing with thorny HR issues is simply not something you can do via prac- tice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn’t mean you have to go looking for staff trouble.

In fact, if you implement a few common sense human resources strategies, you’ll find that significant strides in reducing the number and level of employee headaches you’ll have to face.

Start with the hiring process. Plan carefully and take your time. Certainly, a staff opening creates temporary stress on everyone, but the consequences of a poor hire can crush a team and spark a negative aura around a prac- tice, whether you like it or not. However, that doesn’t mean you have to go looking for staff trouble.

Placement ads for new hires in those professional journals and online sites that will attract the type of employee you’re seeking. For example, in addition to advertising in the local paper, consider area newsletters geared toward den- tal assistants, hygienists, and so forth. Have your ads in management newsletters, such as Women in Management.

Plan and prepare for your inter- views. Ask the same questions to all candidates to ensure you can compare their responses.

5. Be specific. Don’t candy-coat the feedback and don’t beat around the bush. Tell employees what they are doing well and what needs to be cor- rected.

6. Know when to cut your losses. Progressive discipline

In some cases, regardless of efforts to help an employee suc- ceed, it simply doesn’t work out and dismissal is inevitable. How- ever, the process of terminating an employee begins long before you’re ready to escort her/him out of the building, but this troub- lesome exercise need not be your human resources burden to bear alone. I recommend that you let problem employees dis- miss themselves.

Unless the employee’s be- havior is so egregious that you are forced to take immediate ac- tion, the team member should be given the opportunity to improve her/his performance over a 60-90 day period. But don’t just call them aside and encourage them to try a little harder. Explain to the employee verbally and in writing the specific issues that are not satisfactory and document exactly what needs to change in the employee’s performance.

With the employee, develop an agreement that spells out what she/he needs to do to improve. It should be in writing, signed by both doctor and employee, and placed in the employee’s file. Monitor the staff member’s progress, give regular feedback, and document every step in the process.

If the team member is violat- ing established practice policies, such as coming in late, leaving early, disregarding patient pro- tocols, etc., respond with an “Employee Warning Notice” or similar document. Even if she/he has dental skills, it’s the employee’s choice to fail—employees aren’t exactly what is expected of them.纪事者们, do not deny the incident and provide them with a chance to try back into their old ways. The penalties become stronger if the employee misconduct or poor performance is repeated. For exam- ple, may it start with an oral warning, proceed to a written warning, then suspension, and ultimately termination.

When the employee sees the documentation and when they understand the progressive dis- cipline policies, they cannot deny that they are responsible for their actions and the consequences. It’s isn’t the dentist’s decision to terminate the employee, rather it’s the employee’s choice to fail to correct the problem. Now is the time to escort them to the door, and even this should be carefully planned.

Never dismiss an employee when you are angry. Prepare for the fire and spare yourself a nasty burn. Here’s how:

- Tell the employee that the pur- pose of the meeting is to release them from her/his position.
- Don’t go into the details of the performance problems. Through the progressive dis- cipline procedures, the em- ployee has been provided nu- merous opportunities over the past 60-90 days to understand and address the performance issues.
- Give the employee a check on the spot for earned salary and benefits or tell them to expect payment within a certain num- ber of days.
- The person then should be es- corted to collect their personal property and hand over the office key.
- When the employee is gone, call the team together and inform them that the employee is no longer with the practice.
- Do not get into any details re- garding the dismissal. It’s im- portant that the team hear from the doctor as soon as possible to avoid speculation and gossip.

Although firing an employee is something extraordinarily diffi- cult for most dentists, every step is taken most dentists find that it was the best thing they could have done for both themselves and the practice, and, typ- ically, it was long overdue.