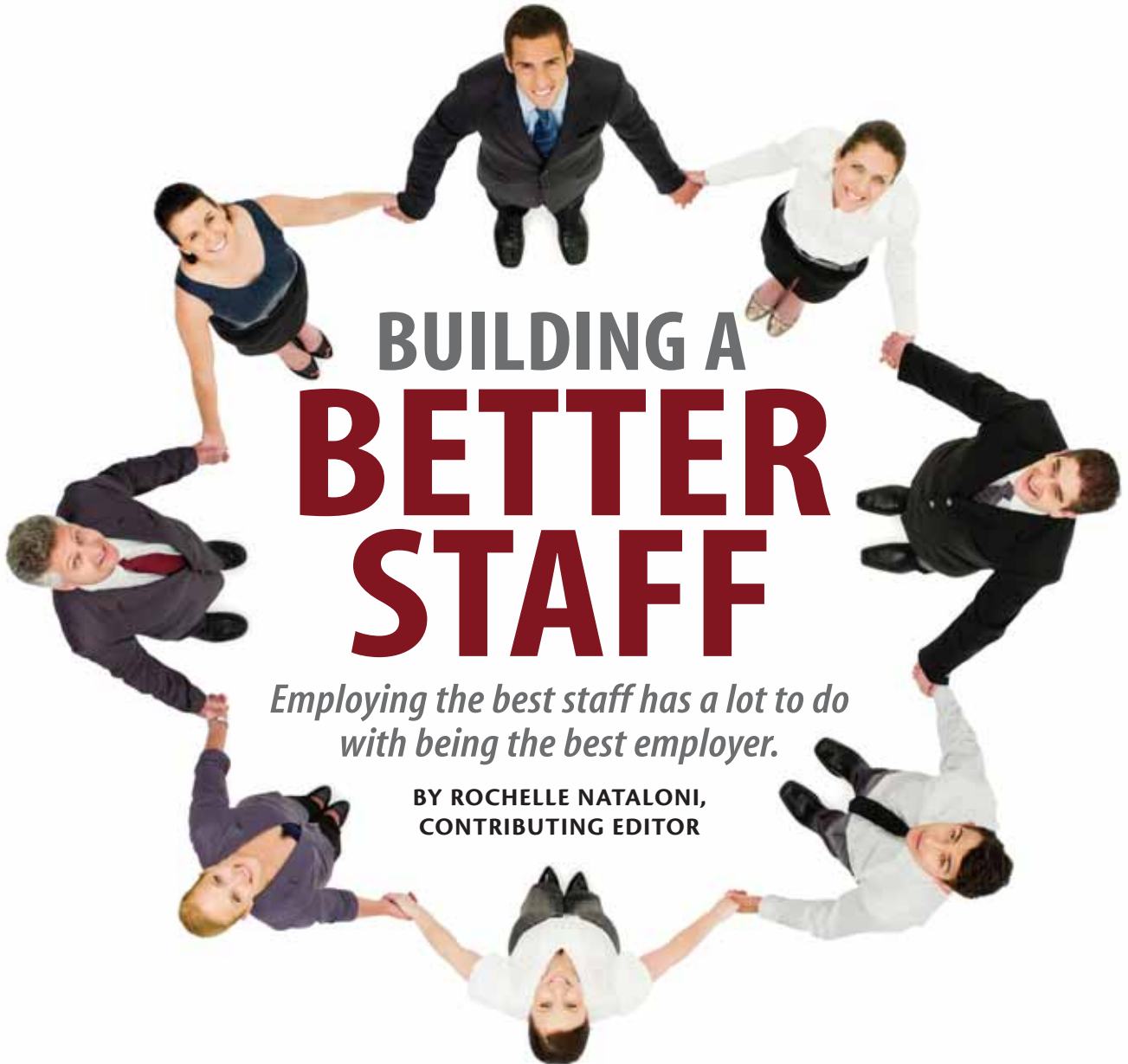


PREMIUM PRACTICE

January 2012
Volume 3, No. 1

TODAY



BUILDING A **BETTER STAFF**

*Employing the best staff has a lot to do
with being the best employer.*

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Building a Better Staff

Employing the best staff has a lot to do with being the best employer.

BY ROCHELLE NATALONI, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Doctors often lament that they have a hard time keeping staff, in spite of the fact that they pay above-average salaries. Newsflash: it's not about the money! As this month's Premium Practice Today makes clear, hiring and retaining excellent staff are closely tied to the overall culture and management of the practice. When doctors complain, I tell them to look into the mirror and hope they recognize the source of the problem. Legendary restaurateur Danny Meyer has it right when he puts employees above customers: "If the employees are happy and motivated, they will take care of the customer." Unfortunately, I have seen the flip side of this advice, where poor staff morale cannot help but seep out and adversely affect patients' experiences.

The advice this month is solid; I am especially fond of Zappos and the financial bounty offered to new hires to leave the company. That's innovation!

—Section Editor Shareef Mahdavi

Whether you are the head honcho and only physician in an up-and-coming cataract and refractive surgery practice or the CEO of an expansive ophthalmic ambulatory surgical center, hiring and keeping the best possible employees and coworkers are as integral to the success of your enterprise as attracting and retaining patients. Experts in the area of human resources say building a staff that works well—and works well together—is like fitting together the pieces of a puzzle. It is about more than simply finding the right candidates, however; it is also about providing the kind of environment in which they will flourish.

Whether you are creating a better staff or a better environment for staff, trust is the grease that helps all of the other building blocks slip into place. This is according to the philosophy espoused by Great Place to Work (www.greatplacetowork.com), a company that develops metrics that establish the standard of what a great workplace is. For instance, the company's Trust Index Assessment & Employee Survey (tinyurl.com/7lcmqtr) is based on annual data from more than 10 million employees in 45 countries representing over 5,500 organizations of various sizes, industries, and structures.

Marcus Erb is a senior research partner with Great Place to Work in San Francisco. He says, "A great place to work is one where employees feel they trust whom they work for, have pride in what they do, and enjoy the people they work

with." Mr. Erb has a background in psychology and works closely with companies to understand and improve their workplaces. "A great place to work is not about policies and benefits and perks," he adds. "[Those are] part of puzzle, but there's something more fundamental to it. When we set out to find the best workplaces, we thought there might be a set of policies and practices that would be common among them, almost a recipe that they would all follow, but there really wasn't. What we found was that two companies in the same industry could have the same benefits and perks, but in one company, the employees talked about how much they loved working there, and in the other, even though they had the same compensation structure and time off, they said they didn't like working there. When we dug deep enough, we found out that it was all about relationships; it was about the trust, the pride, and camaraderie they experienced. For those workplaces that are able to build and achieve a consistent experience of trust and camaraderie, it's a great boon to the bottom line."

As Mr. Erb points out, the benefits to having employees who are happy to work for you are threefold. First, if your business has a reputation as a great workplace, the best candidates will seek you out. Second, you will retain employees, so you can spend your time concentrating on building the practice instead of constantly hiring and retraining staff. Third, the best workplaces have higher customer satisfaction ratings (Figure). Offering excellent customer service and satisfying

patients require a team effort, Mr. Erb notes. "A great workplace ensures that everybody on that team is focused on and capable of delivering the same experience to their customers or patients," he says. "When we assess health care systems, we find that the ones that are the best workplaces are those that assume that every person in the enterprise is focused on the patient. [They] encourage everyone to be focused on the patient and reward everyone for being focused on the patient. Everyone from the chief administrator down to the environmental services worker is focused on helping the patient have a good experience."

Mr. Erb says it is not surprising that some of the most successful companies, such as Zappos, also rank among the best places to work. Zappos took 2011's number 6 spot on *Fortune's* "100 Best Companies to Work For" list (tinyurl.com/6h5oer3). The list is produced by Great Place to Work.

"In business, happiness is often seen as a result of profits, not a driver," comments Mr. Erb. "What happens," he asks, "when this dynamic is reversed, and happiness becomes the first line of business?" In the case of Zappos, which provides 5 weeks of paid training and offers a \$2,000 payment to those who opt out of taking the position if they are not 100% committed to the company's philosophy, the result is a multibillion-dollar company known best for its superlative customer service. Speaking at the 2011 Great Place to Work Conference, Tony Hsieh, Zappos' CEO and founder, said, "A company's culture and a company's brand are really just two sides of the same coin. What goes around the office comes around to the customer. This philosophy is the premise for everything Zappos does, and it has resulted in a celebrated customer service culture." Mr. Erb says, "When you translate that to health care, it means stronger patient satisfaction."

ANOTHER SATISFIED PATIENT

Brian S. Biesman, MD, has a unique and effective way of building a patient-focused, customer service-oriented staff.

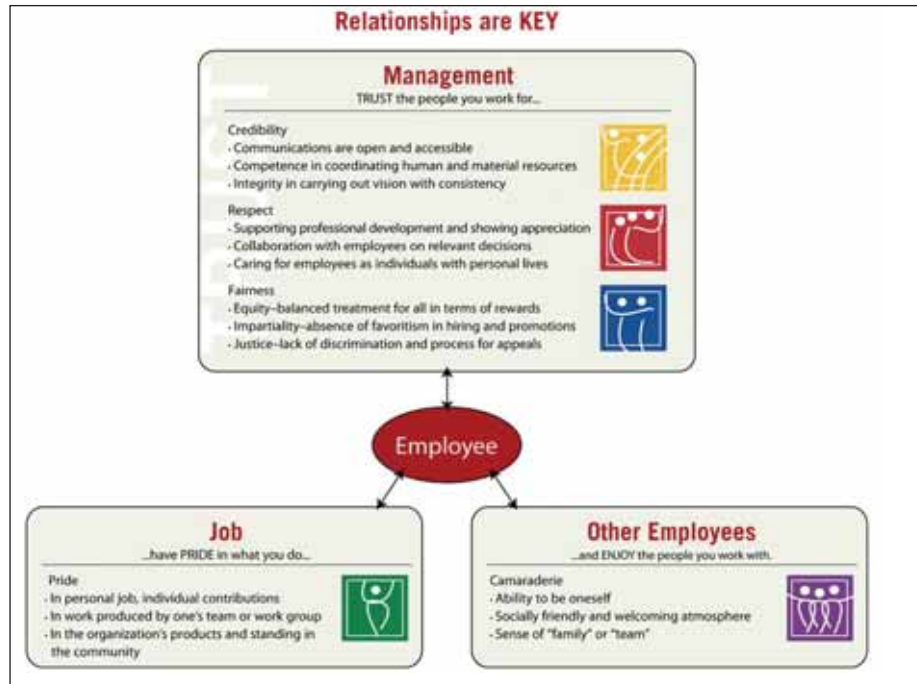


Figure. The approach espoused by Great Place to Work.

"When we add someone to the staff," he says, "everyone on staff interviews the candidate." Everyone has equal input in the decision-making process. Dr. Biesman heads a small staff of 10 at the Nashville Centre for Laser and Facial Surgery, where he specializes in cosmetic and reconstructive eyelid surgery (tinyurl.com/7o6xlk2). "I believe that every single person plays a very important role here," he explains. "I empower each of them to use their strengths. I guide them, but I don't micromanage them."

"When we set out to bring in someone new, we are looking for high-quality, intelligent people who understand that we're all in this together, that they won't get ahead by making someone else look bad," Dr. Biesman says. Making hiring decisions as a team serves several purposes. One of the less obvious reasons is that, if the new hire does not fit in as seamlessly as planned, the team pulls together even more. "We all hired the person, so we all have to figure out a solution to make it work out," he explains. If a new hire does not pan out for some reason, "everyone has ownership in the decision to let the person go, because it isn't fair to keep someone on who is going to be a handicap to the entire staff," Dr. Biesman says. "The bottom line is I try to find the best people, I pay them extremely well, and then I try to make our workplace environment such that they can't find a better opportunity."

PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD ... AND LAY YOUR CARDS ON THE TABLE

Growing a cataract and refractive surgery practice so that additional clinicians are needed to accommodate demand is the dream of every entrepreneurially inclined practice owner. Identifying a candidate with whom you feel comfortable sharing your time, space, investment, and reputation, however, can feel like a nightmare. It does not have to, says Lauren Simon, owner of The Eye Group, an ophthalmic search and placement firm based in Boca Raton, Florida. When adding a surgeon to your team, her primary recommendation is to stop looking at the paper and start looking at the person. "Many times, our clients rely on a CV to determine their level of interest in a candidate," says Ms. Simon. "I tell them that, while educational background and surgical skills are very important traits to look for, a personality fit is the most essential piece of the puzzle."

Ms. Simon says to keep the following in mind when seeking a surgeon for your burgeoning practice:

- Everyone is looking for the perfect candidate with a great personality, outstanding surgical skills, strong entrepreneurial skills, excellent rapport with patients, and great staff relations.
- There are fewer ophthalmologists out there than there are job openings. Each candidate typically has five to six offers in the cities he or she desires.
- If you want that great candidate, you have to be competitive.
- It is the practice's responsibility to perform due diligence on the candidate and decide what is important to the practice prior to hiring him or her. It is the practice's responsibility to communicate this to the candidate. For example, the practice might want to focus on someone who can market the practice or someone who is interested in research.

- The hiring team should provide a job description and have the candidate sign it so that everyone is literally on the same page.
- The hiring team should spend time with the new clinician to help him or her become integrated into the practice. Many practices give up on candidates too quickly without ever outlining expectations. This is a costly mistake.

IT'S NOT ME. IT'S YOU

Ms. Simon says that, no matter how extensive the due diligence, sometimes, things do not work out. "Terminating the employee in a professional manner is essential," she emphasizes, and she offers a few tips:

- Allow the physician to leave with dignity.
- Show respect and compassion during this difficult process.
- Notify your staff in a timely manner.

Red flags that a candidate is not working out include

- An unsuitable attitude such as a lack of communication with or offensive treatment of the staff
- A lack of enthusiasm, as evidenced by early departures and the use of down time as personal time instead of practice-building time
- Insufficient skills and high complication rates
- The ignoring of advice and failure to make adjustments to improve skills and reduce complications

Ms. Simon's bottom line: "There is a good fit for every practice. The most important thing is to outline expectations at the start with a detailed job description so that you can always refer back to that document. It's also important to outline the buy-in upfront. When the buy-in is spelled out, the two parties move forward seamlessly."

A HELPING ETHIC HELPS

The term *patient focused* takes on a unique meaning in ophthalmology practices that specialize in refractive surgery and premium IOLs. Cherry Tabb is CEO and co-owner of Herzig Eye Institute in Toronto. When hiring refractive surgery consultants, she looks for candidates who can sell but also have clinical competence and compassion (● www.herzig-eye.com/home.htm). "If you hire someone for this position who is strictly a salesperson [and] who is all about 'the numbers,' they will get very frustrated dealing with patients' fears and uncertainty," she explains. "If you hire someone who truly cares about

helping patients achieve a better lifestyle and has appropriate clinical knowledge as well, it works out best for everyone. These people need to be convinced that they have a great solution that they can make available to patients so that they can overcome lifestyle barriers. I call this kind of person someone who has a 'helping ethic.' That's the kind of person who sees themselves not as just someone who is selling something to the patient; they see themselves as someone who is solving the problems of the patient."

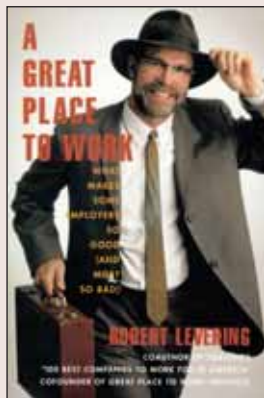
Dr. Biesman, Ms. Tabb, and Mr. Erb all agree that the key to attracting and retaining excellent, patient-focused employees is to provide an environment that fosters trust

and camaraderie. The worst thing that the lead physician or administrator can do, they say, is to project an attitude that suggests that the employees should be grateful to have a job given the state of the economy. “[In those situations,] the employees are probably already looking for better opportunities elsewhere,” says Mr. Erb.

High turnover is costly and is often mistakenly considered a reflection on the employees. In reality, employers play a significant role in the revolving door problem, says Lauren Simon, owner of The Eye Group, an ophthalmic search and placement company based in Boca Raton, Florida (www.theeyegroup.com). “Oftentimes, our clients actually hinder their practices’ growth with a high staff turnover rate,” she comments. “It is time consuming and costly. It hurts their reputation as a practice, and it hurts staff morale. It also leaves the practice with less desirable candidates when they are looking to add a surgeon, because most candidates don’t want to consider practices that have a high staff turnover [rate].”

Mr. Erb says small businesses and medical practices sometimes stick with the status quo rather than try to make changes because of the erroneous notion that

The mantra of Robert Levering, cofounder of Great Place to Work, is that any company can become a great workplace. In his book *A Great Place to Work: What Makes Some Employers so Good—and Most so Bad*, he uses interviews and anecdotes from the best employers to show why the most essential ingredient of a great workplace is trust between



employees and management. He also explains why conventional managerial practices make it difficult to create a good working environment and provides case studies of positive and negative transformations of the workplaces. Mr. Levering says, “Good workplaces are worth examining if for no other reason than that they enrich the lives of the people working there. Everyone, after all, would prefer working in a pleasant environment to an unpleasant one. Since most of us spend the greater part of our waking hours at work, this is no small matter.”

More information about Mr. Levering’s book can be found here: tinyurl.com/86epuaj.

ENHANCED PEARLS

Look for the pearl icons in every edition of *Premium Practice Today* that indicate interactive or multimedia elements.

Audio Video Web site

- Great Place to Work**
(www.greatplacetowork.com)
Trust Index Assessment & Employee Survey
(tinyurl.com/7lcmqtr)
Fortune’s 100 Best Companies to Work for
(tinyurl.com/6h5oer3)
A Great Place to Work: What Makes Some Employers so Good—and Most so Bad
(tinyurl.com/86epuaj)
The Eye Group
(www.theeyegroup.com)

- Nashville Centre for Laser and Facial Surgery**
(tinyurl.com/7o6xlk2)
Herzig Eye Institute
(www.herzig-eye.com/home.htm)

becoming a more appealing employer will simply cost too much. “Sometimes people say, ‘We’re a small business. We can’t do the things that a company like Google can do for its employees, but, it’s not all about paying people more or lavishing them with perks,’” Mr. Erb comments. “Small businesses and medical practices actually have an advantage, because the lead physician or top administrator is closer to the employees on a day-to-day basis. They can find out what small meaningful gestures will make a big difference.”

Ultimately, says Mr. Erb, “There are a lot more benefits than barriers to providing a great workplace, and anybody who wants to do it can start tomorrow [by] changing things a little at a time to make things better.” ■

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