

MANAGING EMPLOYEES WITH DIVERSE PERSONALITIES AND INTERESTS

Physicians must lead by example, setting a tone of cooperation, gratitude, and service.

BY QUENTIN B. ALLEN, MD

Located in Southeast Florida, outside West Palm Beach, our group practice of five ophthalmologists and five optometrists is, by definition, extremely diverse. Our practice locations span a 50-mile-wide region across three counties with diverse populations. Some of our offices are in urban locations and others are in more suburban environments.

We have more than 100 staff members, with English, Spanish, Creole, and Asian languages represented. Our practice is fortunate to have developed a reputation for premium refractive services and outcomes over many years, and our staff is the front line, presenting a welcoming and professional demeanor that reflects our high standards.

Physicians, whether we are formally designated as managers or not, represent part of the leadership

structure of every medical practice. In that role as leaders, how do we maintain a diverse, welcoming work atmosphere? And how do we care for employees with different personalities and interests? Some ideas on these topics are addressed in this article and overviewed in *Tips for Caring for Employees With Different Personalities and Interests*.

Our staff members look to us, the physician-leaders, for guidance in messaging, attitude, and approach to patients and to one another in the work environment. I believe that maintaining a tone of cooperation, gratitude, and service from the top down is a must for every practice, and the physician is a crucial component of this tone. The physician has a responsibility to help bring together a diverse group of employees to focus on the mission of

providing high-quality, compassionate care to our patients with chronic vision-threatening diseases.

LEARNING ABOUT LIVES

How do we become intentional about being leaders and facilitating cohesion in the work environment among people of different interests, cultures, and backgrounds? There are some basic things that I learned from an early age, with jobs in fast-food restaurants and grocery stores that I worked at in high school, that I find still hold true in any work environment.

All the people we work with have the same basic issues to contend with in their daily lives. We all have families, whether that means children, parents, or pets we care for, and significant others we care about. We all have recreational activities that we enjoy

outside of work. Finding out more about the people we work with, from lunchtime discussions or 5-minute connections in the hallways at work, helps to forge bonds of common interest and understanding, no matter what culture or life-stage we represent.

I find it gratifying to know how my coworkers' kids are doing in school or with cheerleading, or what their plans are for spring break. These little discussions may lead to finding out important information. Perhaps a staff member has an aging parent being moved to an assisted-living facility and is having trouble coping with the transition.

These little things may seem obvious, but sometimes physicians can get stuck in a rut worrying about practice issues and their own personal issues. We forget to connect with the important people in our offices who help us to do the things we love. Forging these bonds allows us to understand how to be a better leader. It helps us know how and when to step in if there are issues with staff members and how best to approach each person as an individual, understanding his or her unique background and circumstances.

WELCOMING DIFFERENCES

Although we may be tired of hearing the term *politically correct*, it is important to remember that we must welcome differences in our daily existence and in our workplace environment. When staff members, patients, or other physicians begin a discussion that could create division or hard feelings—such as one regarding religion, race, or politics—it may be necessary to intervene to tamp down the debate. These conversational land mines should be avoided at all costs.

Our staff members have diverse backgrounds, and their formative experiences may foster strong beliefs that are very different from our own. Of course, this is the United States, and we are all allowed to have and express our opinions, but we must remember that some things cannot be unsaid. And, once said, they will not be forgotten.

The repercussions of certain discussions are probably not worth the frictional cost in your workplace environment.

CELEBRATING SUCCESS

For our large practice, we believe it is important to host meetings that bring all of our staff members together to celebrate our successes, reinforce positive messaging, and address any issues that affect the entire staff. We are fortunate to have an administrator who helps provide this type of messaging at these meetings. In some smaller practices, however, this responsibility may fall on the physicians themselves, and its importance should not be overlooked.

Humor in the workplace is also vital, and I am fortunate to work with a group of fun-loving, lighthearted people who don't take themselves too seriously. This is especially important for the physicians in the practice. When our staff members and patients know that we are not serious and stuffy 100% of the time, we become more approachable.

Medicine is serious business, but having a little fun along the way helps to create a work environment where people can enjoy spending 40-plus hours a week away from their families. Happy staff members will also spread the word, and this can be crucial in recruiting other good employees. This

has been an issue in our area, with limited training programs available for ophthalmic technicians.

GOOD STEWARDSHIP

In our practices, there is always opportunity to be good stewards of our community by donating our care or services and products to those in need. When our staff members see that we have a commitment to care for those who do not have the resources to provide for themselves, this reinforces the principles that should guide us all as caregivers.

It also creates positive feelings about our work environment and illustrates how we can truly make a difference in our communities. This is personally and professionally gratifying in itself, but it has the secondary benefit of fostering a culture of service and gratitude that has a ripple effect among the staff.

WHEN ISSUES ARISE

For me, it is important to strive for a 100% drama-free work environment in which everyone stays focused on our patients and their needs and has an amazing time in the process. This a great goal to strive for, but it is a practically unachievable ideal in the real world. With a staff diverse in age, culture, and hierarchy, issues will inevitably arise.

TIPS FOR CARING FOR EMPLOYEES WITH DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES AND INTERESTS

- ▶ Connect with the people in your office and forge bonds with them.
- ▶ Welcome differences in personalities and in your workplace environment, but do not be afraid to intervene and tamp down any debate or differing opinions when necessary.
- ▶ Host meetings that bring your staff members together to celebrate successes, reinforce positive messaging, and address any issues that affect the entire staff.
- ▶ Find ways to promote humor in the workplace.
- ▶ Foster a culture of service and gratitude that will have a ripple effect among the staff.
- ▶ Address any issues immediately and privately, so that small issues do not fester into larger problems for the organization.
- ▶ Talk openly about your differences in a respectful and compassionate way.

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When staff members have issues with one another or with a physician, I believe it is critical to address them immediately, so that small issues do not fester and become larger problems for the organization. The same rules that apply in my own family—talking openly about our differences in a respectful and compassionate way—also apply when we deal with our staff members. This helps us to maintain a harmonious work environment. It is important to have any such discussions in private, in an office or examination lane behind a

closed door, to prevent hurt feelings or embarrassment.

In our practices, the physicians, administrators, and managers should be examples for the rest of the staff. When we have an issue with a belligerent patient or feel slighted by another physician, the way in which we handle these scenarios sets the tone for what is deemed appropriate in our practices.

CONCLUSION

Cultivating a rewarding work environment with uniform values

requires consistency of thought and action so that we as physicians can maintain a positive tone in the practice. For the physicians and managers in our practice, the downstream benefits of maintaining a progressive and open culture in the workplace are worth the effort. ■



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