
A Business Model for Employee Relations and Customer Service

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You cannot manage a business or an orthodontic office to its maximum potential unless it is a great place to work. In today's orthodontic office, with its reliance on delegation to ancillary personnel, most of the human-resource principles of a successful large company are applicable, even though we are not dealing with the same number of people.

According to Hewitt, a consulting firm, the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work for in America consistently have four traits in common: (1) They listen to and use employee input in their decision-making process, (2) they value people as individuals rather than just for the work they do, (3) they offer all employees opportunities for development and learning, and (4) they base pay structures on performance and competence. I am certain that unless these four criteria apply to your office, your staff will neither be as productive as possible nor achieve the longevity that makes their training costs worthwhile.

Hiring and Recruiting

To select people for training who will warrant the company's time and investment, each new applicant must be tested. This approach allows for a more objective hiring process, thereby reducing the possibility of error.



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Some 20 years ago, several successful orthodontists put together a set of questions that were submitted to all their staff members. The answers to these questions were then given to a firm that specializes in testing future employees for major corporations.* From the accumulated raw data, a test was devised that could be given to applicants to evaluate their potential to become a chairside assistant, a treatment coordinator, or an administrative staff member. Following this initial appraisal, personal interviews should be conducted, preferably by staff members in the early stages and the doctor later in the process. One of several available dexterity tests should also be given to any applicant who wants to become a chairside assistant.

With the cost of selecting and training a new employee with no previous orthodontic background estimated in the thousands of dollars, the selection process demands as much attention as the selection of the bracket system you intend to use. Regrettably, most offices have not developed a thorough selection process. This laissez faire approach leads to a high staff turnover rate, which has a direct effect on practice efficiency, volume, and profitability. Draw your own conclusions.

There is a difference between inherent characteristics and learned skills. Friendliness, affability, and other people-oriented traits cannot be taught. Most of the other necessary skills can be learned if the aptitude is present. These facts emphasize the importance of testing and interviewing before a final selection is made.

As a word of caution, all statements made on the job application regarding employment, education, references, and so on should be verified. Not being completely honest and forthright is sufficient cause not to consider that applicant for employment. There are many legitimate rea-

*H.R. Chally Group, 1900 Founders Drive, Dayton, OH 45420. (937) 259-1200.

sons why an applicant's employment could have been terminated by a previous employer. If, in your judgment, the applicant's version of the situation is understandable and verifiable, it should not detract from that person's chances of employment. However, a lack of honesty in any area should be a big red flag.

When it comes to recruiting, a three- or four-line ad in the classified section can bring very few or no responses. In today's tight labor market, we must approach our employee search in some ways that may not be traditional. The first place to check is with present staff members. You would be surprised how often an acquaintance or family member is looking for a new situation. Another good source is the mothers of existing patients. During treatment of a family member, you may find a mother whose children are now old enough that she no longer needs to be there when they come home after school. If you think that individual would be a good fit for your office, approach her about possible employment. Many of these mothers will not have considered entering the job market until you plant the seed, but the quality of this kind of recruit is usually high.

Another variation is placing your ad in a section of the newspaper other than the classifieds. It is a little more expensive, but sometimes a box ad in the section aimed at women, especially on Wednesdays in most cities, might uncover a person who also may not have thought about reentering the job market. It is a good idea to use your name in the ad, especially if people have heard good things about you and your office. An ad placed in the neighborhood paper in addition to the city paper can also reap a lot of dividends. Today, more than at any time in recent memory, it is absolutely necessary to use your imagination in the competition for quality employees.

Staff Training

The training program for new employees should start immediately after a new hire is selected and cover not only the skills necessary

to function in the organization, but also the history and values of the practice. An orthodontist's new employees should feel they are part of an organization that takes pride in where it has been and where it is going. One idea that I've always wanted to institute in our office is that a new hire does not become a paid employee until one month of training has been completed. Unfortunately, I don't think this approach is feasible in orthodontics today.

Any good educational program has a textbook. Each office should develop its own. After all, everybody does things a little differently. Asking the most qualified person in each section of your office to do the initial write-up is the best and easiest way to get a training manual started. The doctor should review the initial draft with the purpose of reemphasizing, rearranging, or expanding the material put together by the staff. You must remember that your training manual will have to be updated periodically—much more often now, in fact, than 20 years ago.

Lack of training or training without a written reference guide is a major cause of stress for a new hire. Any employee placed in such a position will not accept the strain for long and will soon seek a better situation.

Furthermore, teaching without testing is not fair to the trainee or to the office. A new employee should be dismissed if a set number of tests are failed. This approach may seem harsh, but it weeds out employees who probably would have proven unsatisfactory down the road.

Employee Retention

No business or orthodontic practice can survive and prosper unless it creates an atmosphere in which the employees want to do what is best for the company. Such an ideal work environment is not achieved quickly or easily. Orthodontists need to develop mission statements that describe how they approach high-quality orthodontic treatment, how they value their patients, and how they appreciate their staff and incorporate them into their success. We need to understand the values we share with our staff, since

they are so important to the accomplishments of the office.

Office parties and other celebrations can significantly enhance the "esprit de corps" of the doctors and staff. Observing birthdays, major wedding anniversaries, and other happy life-cycle events is an obvious way to create a cheerful atmosphere. "Add-a-bead" necklaces can be used to celebrate employment longevity. Publishing write-ups about various staff members in the office newsletter or on the website will create some warm fuzzies among the staff. Office picnics that include all the family members will let the relatives know what a great place your office is to work. Depending on your budget, you can conjure up many more ideas that can help create an atmosphere of harmony. When the staff considers it "my office", "my equipment", and "my patient", then you have reached the highest plateau of employee satisfaction.

Although pay, benefits, and recognition are absolutely essential in maintaining good staff relations, if the climate in which they work is unsatisfactory, money may not matter. This is especially true now, because a trained orthodontic staff member can almost immediately find employment in another orthodontic office. Still, the constancy of employee incentive programs is an important factor in maintaining a high retention rate. If the staff knows what motivational programs are in place and reacts positively to them, leave them alone. They can be modified or updated, but as the saying goes, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." I have found that because the average age of most staffs is fairly young, a profit-sharing plan that provides more immediate benefits than a pension or 401(k) plan is sometimes better received. Another great benefit is free orthodontic care for any staff member after a certain length of employment, along with reduced fees for any of their family members.

A great way to create a climate that encourages longevity is to promote from within. Obviously, this allows you to place an employee who is already acclimated to your office procedures in a position of higher responsibility. That is an incalculable benefit to the practice.

Customer Service

If studies of the Fortune 100 show that employee satisfaction and tenure are basic to the achievement of maximum profitability, we in orthodontics should follow their lead. Some business consultants, however, believe that good treatment of employees precedes good treatment of customers. I don't know if I can agree with that. It is my feeling that both the patient and the staff member should be treated equally well. Since our success is dependent upon the creation of an excellent rapport with both, I don't see how we can value one over the other.

In business, as well as in the professions, the only thing separating the successful from the mediocre may be how well the clients are treated. If we orthodontists think we are only in the business of straightening teeth, we will soon go the way of the railroads, who thought they were only in the train business. It would behoove all of us to consider ourselves service offices that earn their income by doing orthodontics, rather than orthodontists who earn their income by straightening teeth. Understanding and implementing this philosophy is often the cause for success or failure, especially in these competitive times. All other things being equal, the most successful practices excel in the area of customer service.

In my practice, we believe so strongly in providing outstanding customer (patient and family) care that we have developed a training program for our entire staff called "Patient Appreciation". Not only is this taught in our initial training program, but we also review it annually with our entire staff.

Building and maintaining a successful orthodontic practice is a constant challenge. For us to attain the clinical excellence we all desire, we must also achieve our goals of financial success. Obviously, we can learn much from the accomplishments of others in the service industry. Appreciate all the information they are willing to share. Take what is best for you. It will improve your chances of success many times over. □