Your success—and that of your practice—begins and ends with your staff. Even if you have the best doctor in your market—impeccably trained in the latest techniques and utilizing state-of-the-art equipment in a modern, efficient facility—you will only be as good as your staff. A motivated, happy staff can help take you to the top of your profession, whereas a dysfunctional, malcontent support team can spell economic and professional disaster. How well your staff performs can be the difference between success and failure. As the practice leader, your job is to build and sustain an employee-focused culture of success.

Case Study
Knowing his formal retirement party is just hours away, Dr. Leed contemplates a heartfelt question posed by his long-time practice administrator: “Looking back, what would you list as your most meaningful career accomplishment?” Shy and studious as a young adult, Dr. Leed knew the answer immediately—his personal and professional growth as a leader. “I always had confidence in my ability to be a good doctor,” he recalls. “Leading a staff, on the other hand, did not come naturally to me. I had to work hard at it every day. I can honestly say, however, that much of the enduring success of my practice is due to a commitment I made early in my career to develop a meaningful and visible set of leadership skills and principles.”

Success Tips
To inspire your staff to “be the best it can be,” your practice’s culture of success should be built on these leadership principles:

- **Accentuate the positive.** Everyone is happier working in a positive, encouraging atmosphere. As the leader, adopt the “high road” approach and watch your people grow, both individually and professionally. A positive work environment, where success is acknowledged and rewarded, means employees will look forward to coming to work, wear a smile, and gladly go the extra distance.

- **Be inclusive.** Embrace all staff members, not just your personal favorites—or none at all. The real world dictates you will like certain staff members more than others, but playing favorites is a surefire way to create hostility and resentment among staff that can fester and dramatically impact individual and group performance. This is especially true when your favoritism is obvious yet is not based on evident performance or results. If you treat someone differently based on “insider” knowledge, understand that others who do not have access to that information will “see” things differently.
Encourage mentoring. Learning and growth are critical to the sustained well-being of any staff. This is especially true in a challenging business climate that requires everyone to do more with less. Take full advantage of your more experienced employees who can provide valuable knowledge and guidance to newer staff members. You do not have to set up a formal mentor program, but taking advantage of your hard-earned knowledge base certainly makes sense, especially when formal training time is expensive and time-consuming. A mentor culture is a win-win for everyone: Those serving as mentors delight in their unique contributions, while employees enjoy “special” attention from respected, established members of the team who afford them opportunities to expand their own knowledge base and develop new skills.

Get to know your employees. It’s perfectly fine to develop professional relationships with your employees. In fact, it is encouraged. Your goal should not be to befriend everyone but to gain insight and understanding about what inspires and motivates them to perform their best and, conversely, what “shuts them down.” Having a clear understanding of each individual’s professional needs and style can make for a more even-keeled and success-oriented work environment.

Share information. People are scared today knowing they could be fired tomorrow and face an uncertain future without a steady paycheck or insurance coverage. Take an occasional moment to put your employees at ease as best you can. While it is difficult to know exactly what the future holds, give your employees some sense of stability and confidence by painting an honest “state of the practice” picture. You do not have to divulge any specific personal or financial information, but staff will appreciate periodic updates that are candid and realistic. This is a great opportunity to share your vision for the practice and show you are engaged in strategic planning for the future.

Encourage teamwork. While each staff member has a well-defined job description identifying specific duties and responsibilities, every attempt should be made to encourage teamwork within the practice. When appropriate, assign teams comprised of staff who might not normally work together. This will enhance camaraderie and help build a shared feeling that everyone is working toward the same goal. You may also discover strengths in new combinations of coordinated efforts. Be careful not to isolate individuals or small teams, especially if they have some “stand-alone” position or talent.

Lead by example. To create a happy, well-functioning, and dedicated staff, display the traits you want staff to emulate. Be transparent in your actions and style. Hone your management and communications skills to reflect your needs and those of your staff and practice. Let staff clearly understand that you value and reward results-based and moral-based qualities, such as integrity, ethics, hard work, honesty, positive attitude, creativity, teamwork, self-motivation, and goal setting.

Be visible. While your first responsibility is to ensure that your doctor and the practice are as efficient and revenue productive as possible, it is essential to mingle with staff and acknowledge your team on a regular basis. Don’t hide in your office or develop a work pattern that limits your personal interaction to just your doctor or a few, select staff members. Make it clear to everyone that you understand what each team member does and that you value his or her contribution. Personally interact with everyone, up and down your organizational chart.

Encourage thoughtful communication. How staff members communicate with one another—from top to bottom—is critical to building and maintaining a healthy work environment. Whether via email, voicemail, face-to-face conversation, or “sticky note,” thoughtful and considerate communication is the groundwork on which team respect is based. Don’t let one person be a rude or moody communicator. When you see an unhealthy communication taking place, address the issue quietly with that individual and follow up with a team-wide directive, if necessary.

Celebrate. Everyone is extremely busy, and all expenditures should be closely scrutinized and justified in this tight economy. However, now is not the time to eliminate opportunities to enjoy your profession and your relationship with staff members. Yes, times are tough, but there is a great deal for which to be thankful—you are practicing your calling, and you and your staff have meaningful employment, and your patients need you.

Workplace Foundation
You are the leader of a team that admires and respects you for what you have accomplished. Every member of the team is grateful to be gainfully employed in these trying times and deep down wants to play a meaningful role in the ongoing success of the practice. It is imperative that you regard your team with the same feelings of esteem. Developing a workplace foundation based on respect, training, and communication will ensure that staff growth and employee satisfaction are maximized.

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