Personal Check

Recognizing Negative Leadership Behaviors

BY ALEXA S. CHILCUTT, PhD

Why do some dental offices have happy work environments while others seem to be full of turmoil and turnover? Research tells us that the primary predictor of any organization's culture is the leadership behavior of the person in charge. The leader's organizational perspective, decision-making processes, and conflict management tactics all have a major impact on staff.

In addition to conducting research on this topic, I've had the unpleasant experience of working in a negative environment and I've seen how leaders can lose perspective. Oftentimes, leaders become consumed with issues of productivity and efficiency and lose sight of the relational aspects of the organization. They forget about how their behaviors contribute to the culture of their team and, when it comes to health care professionals, their practice.

Think about your communication style and team leadership philosophy.

Review the list below and check the boxes next to the statements with which you agree:

☐ **1** I believe that it is important, for the sake of respect and position, to always take a hierarchical approach to team leadership.

☐ **2** I make decisions that will impact the practice and its operations on my own, or with the other dentists in my practice, and inform the team of the changes to be implemented *ex post facto.*

☐ **3** I am not solicitous of, or open to, feedback concerning my decisions or behaviors from individuals on my team.

☐ **4** I try to avoid conflict in the workplace. It is important for employees themselves to manage negative feelings and/or work-related issues.

> "A leader who sets the tone for respectful and open communication can expect his or her team to engage in healthy forms of conflict management."

If you checked any of the boxes above, you are engaging in behaviors that may create conflict, animosity, or organizational ambiguity. Let's review:

The hierarchical approach

If you checked Box No. 1, it's likely that you intentionally create distance between yourself and your team, but a team benefits from having a leader with a team-oriented view. Instead of the hierarchical approach, communicate with your team that you are "all in it together." All members of your team, including the leader, should see themselves as interdependent and adopt a systems perspective. This perspective is defined by the understanding that, while each member has a task-specific role, all members have to work together to make an office run smoothly and effectively, especially in times of crisis.

The autocratic approach

If you checked Box No. 2, you engage in autocratic decision-making processes. To be sure, there are times when a leader must make a quick decision, especially in a time of crisis. However, research has shown that one of the biggest boosts to team identity is employee involvement in decision-making. A participative style includes the entire team and allows team members to offer input and insight. The result is better overall decision-making and team buy-in, leading to a smoother transition in implementing changes. Allowing your staff to participate in decision-making processes gives them a voice and the ability to effect change, while maintaining respect for the leader's right to make the final decision.

The tight-lipped approach

If you checked Box No. 3 or 4, you may be thwarting the opportunity for positive growth and change within your organization. These statements address the areas of effective communication and productive conflict management. It is vital for a leader to be open to feedback from his or her team members. The team's ability to offer feedback empowers team members and sets the tone for the office as a whole. When feedback is stifled, team members turn to each other to express their concerns or discontent. But, if the leader encourages feedback carried out in a respectful manner, many issues can be addressed immediately and innocuously.

A leader who sets the tone for respectful and open communication can expect his or her team to engage in healthy forms of conflict management. Confrontation, the ability to openly discuss a matter with a focus on resolution, and collaboration allow team members to express opinions or concerns as issues arise and to reach agreeable solutions together.

Moving forward, remember that positive leadership involves and empowers team members. Leading with a team-oriented approach will increase the interdependence, productivity, and overall satisfaction of your team. As a leader, take an honest look at your office environment and staff. Is the environment a positive one in which all members feel interconnected and work toward a common purpose, or are there unresolved issues and residual conflict? A team-oriented approach that includes participative decision-making processes and productive conflict management can make the difference between a positive work environment and a negative one. ◆

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COMMENT