
Selecting, Developing, and Retaining Top Performers

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Building and maintaining a financially successful orthodontic practice, as well as a personally fulfilling journey, requires a team of employees and orthodontist who are motivated, dedicated, and willing to contribute to the health and wellbeing of patients, parents, each other, and the entire practice. For orthodontists to successfully engage and motivate staff, it is vital to have the proper leadership, effective hiring and training processes, clear performance management systems, and opportunities for team members to develop and excel. (Semin Orthod 2011;17:267-274.) © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

In a survey conducted for *Fortune Magazine*, the Hay Group, an internationally renowned human resource consulting firm, confirmed that the ability to attract and retain talented employees was the most reliable predictor of overall excellence in business.¹ Observation has shown that 2 weeks is insufficient time to properly find, hire, and fully train a new employee in the present-day high-quality orthodontic office. When a valued employee gives notice, many orthodontists admit to “hiring by fire,” hoping that this new person will magically work out perfectly in a very short period. Panic hiring frequently results in a poor choice, causing frustration and chaos within the team. Even if they were lucky enough to hire the right person, many new employees quit because of a lack of quality training, not feeling like “one of the team,” or lack of feedback on job performance. The following are guidelines for wise hiring, and the proper integration of a new team member to keep them as a motivated member of the team.

Preparing to Hire

Commonly, effective hiring is considered as the obvious first step. However, to hire the right person, one needs *to be the right person* to attract *the right people* to the team. Factors to be considered are as follows:

1. Employees need to be proud to work for the orthodontist.
2. The orthodontist should be a motivating leader.
3. High-quality new employee training and ongoing continuing education should be provided. Timely feedback must be provided on the work the employees are doing.
4. Every person who works in the office must be sincerely appreciated.
5. The current team should be honored to be working in this practice.
6. The orthodontist can use the most scientific approaches available to determine how to hire; however, an ideal employee is only as good as the rest of the team. If the right employee joins an energetic, successful, productive team, there is a high likelihood this person will succeed. However, if this individual finds an unmotivated, unhappy team, the chance of successful long-term employment is low.
7. The orthodontist and team must look forward to welcoming the new hire, be enthusiastic about seeing this new employee succeed, and already be confident and competent in

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his or her work to make the transition a good one.

Another consideration when hiring is the alignment of work values.² It is important to recognize and clarify the orthodontist's critical work values, demonstrate their commitment to those values, then hire those with similar values. Each value must be able to be clearly articulated and behaviors demonstrate these values. Key office personnel must also be able to articulate these behaviors. Performance discussions and reward programs must be designed with these values in mind in addition to the tasks on their job description. For example, one orthodontist may highly value how fast an employee can complete his or her work; another orthodontist may place a greater value on a warm interaction with patients and parents with speed being of secondary importance.

There are many articles referencing the top values employers look for in employees.³ Examples are as follows:

- strong work ethic;
- dependability;
- responsibility;
- adaptability;
- honesty;
- integrity;
- self-motivation;
- self-confidence;
- positive attitude;
- professionalism;
- loyalty; and
- team spirit

It is important that the orthodontist make a custom list specific to the required values. Employers naturally value employees who are dependable and responsible; those who arrive on time ready for work, and who take responsibility for their actions and behavior. If dependability and responsibility are core values for the orthodontist, then the orthodontist must hold his or her current team members responsible for being on time and for their actions and behavior.

Assuming that the orthodontist has highly valued employees who are willing to work hard and work smart with a positive attitude, then team members must be coached to be efficient and effective in their work. If a change in attitude

occurs, the situation should be immediately investigated.

Professional behavior includes learning every aspect of a job and doing it to the best of one's ability. In addition, professionals look, speak, and dress accordingly to maintain an image of someone who takes pride in their behavior and appearance. If professionalism is a core value, employees should be coached to do their very best, and be held to appearance guidelines. Employers should also require that they treat each other with respect.

Employees want to feel a sense of satisfaction in their jobs and will typically do a good job when they feel that the employer is fair and truly wants to see them do well. If loyalty is a core value, there should be a method to demonstrate this to the team. Feedback should be provided, as well as constructive ways offered to manage conflict and promote open communication on the workings of the office. Creating a culture that values loyalty can use the same techniques and strategies to establish loyalty with patients, and loyalty from patients supports a healthy, satisfying and profitable practice. Aligning an employee's values with the goals of the practice will foster loyalty and a bond between the orthodontist, the individual employee, and the entire team.

Job Descriptions

The cornerstone to any employment decision begins with an analysis of the job to be filled so that a job description can be written. This document clearly describes the employee's duties, responsibilities, and performance expectations. It is also important to clarify expectations for the employee's relations with other office employees, as well as with patients and parents. These job descriptions are also used to assist with developing performance reviews. Job descriptions must be kept current as the employee takes on more responsibility.

Performance Measures and Standards

Once job descriptions are in place, performance standards that describe what constitutes below-average, average, and above-average performance should be established. Next, one should determine how expectations, which are outlined

in the job description, will be measured. This measurement requires both objective and subjective methods of assessment. In some situations it is easy to gauge performance by checking numbers; for example, what percentage of examination patients went into treatment, the percentage and dollar amount of delinquent accounts or an individual assistant's percentage of emergency and extra visit appointments.

Quantifying an employee's coping skills, customer service skills, or attitude is more challenging. Establish clear guidelines and measures that eliminate potential bias and prevent evaluators from subjectively determining what constitutes both excellent and unacceptable behavior.

Hiring

The cost of a poor hiring decision is significant both in financial terms and wear and tear on the entire team. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that the cost of a bad hiring decision is 30% of the first-year salary.⁴ Adler⁵ presents the case that the cost of a bad hiring decision for most positions is twice the person's annual salary. Studies show that more than 20% of the information presented on resumes is false or exaggerated, which adds to the complexity of the process.¹

Some believe that to hire for attitude and train for skill is the key; they believe it is not about finding people with the right experience, it is about finding people with the right mind-set.⁶ Others believe that knowledge and experience are the key ingredients to quickly integrate a new employee. Granted, a serious hiring mistake is to find someone with the right skill but the wrong mind-set and thinking one can change them. However, the opposite can also be true. A good attitude without the innate ability to do a particular job is also a recipe for disaster. Not everyone can be a competent chair-side clinician, just as not everyone can be a successful new patient coordinator or financial specialist. However, above a certain level, the degree of skill (or speed or experience) becomes less important than a candidate's willingness to learn new techniques and adapt to the orthodontist's way of doing things. Equally important is the individual's ability to relate to patients and parents (and to the doctor and other team members) to be able to address their individual needs

and concerns while maintaining efficiency and productivity of the office.

It is also important to know what the needs of the position entail, both in skill and personality. For example, in many offices, a high toleration for stress and attention to detail are 2 important components for a chair-side assistant. Some orthodontists will also ask a perspective employee to duplicate an archwire bend, paperclip, or other shape with the use of a bird beak orthodontic plier and a piece of wire to assess the applicant's hand-eye coordination.

There are many assessment tools available to assist business owners with the hiring process. For example, the DISC Profile, developed by William Moulton Marston,⁷ is a legal and non-judgmental tool for understanding behavioral types and personality styles. This inventory profiles 4 primary behavioral styles, each with a very distinct and predictable pattern of observable behavior. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator instrument⁸ and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter⁹ are other examples of personality style evaluation inventories that can be used to assist with the hiring and retaining processes.

Finally, the practice must provide a policy manual with a thorough description of policies and procedures covering everything from the dress code and on-time policies to benefits and how raises are determined. Sometimes new employees have a different recollection of the details of their employment, such as when they will qualify for a raise or how soon a paid vacation will be provided. By providing applicants with the most accurate and detailed portrait of the office and work expectations, misunderstandings can be avoided and the employee applicant can make an informed decision on their own suitability for a career in the office. Applicants should be encouraged to interview the orthodontist as well to ensure that the hiring will be advantageous for both parties concerned.

Where to Find Quality Employees

The number of staff applicants for the orthodontic office is decreasing. To attract quality employees, it is important to have an ongoing plan to have a source of potential candidates when needed. If the office is fortunate to practice near a dental assistant school or occupational center, the orthodontist should consider

becoming a guest lecturer, getting to know the primary instructors, and asking them to refer their best students to intern in the practice. This not only creates an opportunity to evaluate the intern for a permanent position in the practice, but it also provides an opportunity to evaluate the trainer(s) to determine who has an interest and talent in training.

Some employees who leave the practice to stay home with their children may at some point in time decide to work part-time or be available when urgently needed. The orthodontist should remain in contact with these former full-time employees, perhaps inviting them to lunch on occasion to keep them apprised of the office so that if and when they wish to return to work they will want to work specifically with this office.

When there is an individual who may be a good fit in the office but is working elsewhere, providing a business card and inviting them to make contact with the orthodontist if they would ever be interested in changing jobs is a good way to have people keep the practice in mind.

In many parts of the United States, placing an advertisement in the newspaper is an outdated method of searching for applicants. Internet recruiting is the fastest-growing strategy for finding candidates. <http://Dentalworkers.com>, <http://craigslist.org>, and <http://monster.com> are 3 examples where orthodontists have found success in locating prospective staff.

The office website must be up to date, motivating and interesting to patients and potential employees alike. Some orthodontists have a place on their website where employment opportunities are posted and advise candidates on where they can send their resume. Resumes of high-level individuals who contact the office during a nonhiring period should be kept. These individuals may not always be available when a new staff member is being sought; however, they may know of others who may be interested in a staff position.

Finally, the office must be very clean, neat, and attractive. Walking through the office, as a consultant would to evaluate the office and how it may be perceived by the patients as well as the staff applicant, is advisable.

Start Training and Retaining on Day One—An Effective Orientation

New employees typically feel nervous coming into a new office, working with new people, and being accepted. To ease the transition and take advantage of the opportunity to get the relationship off to a good start, a quality orientation is essential. A successful orientation assists the adaptation process by helping a new employee feel comfortable in the practice and by providing them the information they need to be immediately productive. The biggest mistake with an orientation is to provide only a perfunctory process, and not being committed to the process of helping to make the new employee successful. Newcomers will have their employment decision reinforced if they feel that the entire team is truly happy to have them.

The new employee should be welcomed by signing a welcome card or having a welcome breakfast or lunch. Their name tag and uniforms should be ready if applicable. A checklist of topics, which should be reviewed with each new employee, should be prepared and then an appropriate amount of time made available to discuss these topics. The following items in a New Employee Orientation Checklist are suggested:

- Preparation (welcome letter, order uniforms, name tag).
- Personnel file contents (job application or resume, interview summary, reference check information, verification of any licenses or certifications required, Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration [OSHA] file: hepatitis immunization or waiver signed [if applicable], home address, phone number, Social Security number, emergency information).
- Complete necessary paperwork, such as Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), agreement receipt for their copy of the office employee handbook, forms for payroll and any withholdings from their payroll.
- The following practices and procedures use in the office should be explained: hours of work and attendance/tardiness policy, rate of pay, payroll periods, when paychecks are delivered, overtime rules, training or introductory employment period, employee benefits for which employees are or may become eligible (such

as: medical insurance, sick leave, vacation, personal leave, jury duty, holidays, employee activities), other benefits the practice offers and how much the employer will pay for each.

- General information, such as: parking arrangements, where personal effects are to be stored, and where the required employment posters are located, should be explained.
- Copies of the employee handbook, safety plan and direct payroll deposit request should be provided.
- Any promotional or informational materials that are used with the patients should be shown to the new employee, as well as any DVDs that have been prepared for patients to describe the practice.
- The organization's mission and its philosophy of doing business should be explained. Examples may include "The way we do things around here . . .", "We believe that our patients and parents are . . .", "Nothing is more important than . . ."

Although most of the items on the checklist can be addressed by an office manager or other qualified individual, it is important that the orthodontist is also involved. The orientation is the best time to discuss the necessary attitude required when performing their job as this sets the tone for their tenure with the practice. It should be a positive discussion, with questions being encouraged, and stressing the things that are truly important to the practice.

This process takes time but can clarify important information and avoid misunderstandings. Once the entire team has an understanding of the importance of employee orientation, and is committed to seeing the new person succeed, the orthodontist can begin a successful process of training.

Training

To properly prepare a well chosen new employee for success, there are 4 things that should be addressed: effective systems, an organized training plan, time to train, and a qualified trainer. In most practices, little emphasis is placed on preparing individuals for this critical aspect of training. It is important to have a qualified trainer in each primary area of the practice who has the knowledge,

talent, systems, and tools to prepare a new employee for the position.

Retaining: "You Get What You Reward"

Key employee retention is critical for the long-term health and success of any small business. Retaining the best employees can ensure patient satisfaction and reduce the stress so common among the orthodontist and the team. However, the opposite can also be true. "Burnt-out" employees can create lower productivity and stagnation within the practice. Providing an atmosphere in which employees stay motivated is advantageous for all. Some important factors for retaining talented employees include the following:

Knowing Clearly What Is Expected Every Day at Work

People work better when they know exactly what is expected. Having an organized approach to the day-to-day functions allows time and energy to deal with the unexpected.

Ongoing Education and Quality Training

Employees need to continue to learn and grow professionally to stay motivated and interested in their chosen profession. Regular meaningful continuing education and training is critical to maintain a top-notch team.

Communication

Lack of effective communication from the orthodontist is usually the greatest cause for employee dissatisfaction and turnover. The best employers listen to and communicate frequently with all employees. Communication should include group, and individual meetings. If employees know that their voices are heard and they feel that they are part of the decision-making process, they will be much happier, more loyal, and more likely to support new ideas.

Performance Appraisals

The most common concern of orthodontic employees is that the orthodontist does not provide enough feedback on their performance. They wonder, worry, or become complacent, which affects the quality of their work. Most orthodon-

tists do not like to carry out performance appraisals. However, appropriately carried out performance feedback provides the missing answers that employees are looking for which then supports their motivation to excel. Obviously employees want to hear that they are doing a good job, but they also want to know how the orthodontist truly feels about their performance and how they can improve. It is important to learn how to communicate effectively on a regular basis (not just during review time) and how to conduct fair, nonjudgmental, specific appraisals (including self appraisals). These performance appraisals should be conducted on a regular basis, whether yearly or twice yearly. This should be a 2-way relationship building conversation rather than the orthodontist presenting appraisal information. These sessions should be followed by appropriate training, coaching and mentoring to support employees in reaching the next level of accomplishment.

If coaching and training does not provide the results needed, it is important to let the individual find employment elsewhere. Firing an employee is always difficult. Terminating an employee is an unpleasant task, but retaining the wrong individuals can negatively impact the patients, other employees, and the practice.

Compensation and Rewards

When employees perform well, they should be well compensated. Rewards keep morale high, generate loyalty and foster an interest in additional improvement. Closely linking raises to performance appraisals is a highly debatable issue. Regardless of how and when the compensation review is carried out in the office for the employees, an above-average appraisal deserves acknowledgment. Employees should be consistently rewarded for results.

A performance-based compensation plan that is designed to encourage employees to behave in ways that will result in attainment of the goals of the practice, while also meeting the employees' personal objectives, is ideal. Practice goals usually include growth, profitability, quality service, efficiency, effectiveness, image, and reputation.¹⁰ To attract and retain desirable employees, pay should be equal to or better than other competitive offices. The pay plan must be objective and fair to all employees with rewards com-

mensurate with contributions. The salary plan should encourage behaviors and attitude, such as honesty, professional pride, continuing professional education, loyalty, thoroughness, accuracy, efficiency, teamwork, marketing, courtesy, concern for patients, self-direction, frugality, and long-term thinking.¹¹ The compensation plan is an essential element of the ability to compete effectively for optimal employees.

Office Atmosphere

Employee attitudes are affected by their physical work environment. The office should be attractively decorated and pleasant. All areas should be optimal, including the staff rest room. The impression made on employees is just as important as the image projected to the patients and parents. The office must be kept clean and neat and everyone needs to be involved in this effort.

Recognition

Numerous studies and surveys have documented the fact that money is not always the primary motivator for most employees (although it is very important).¹¹ Employees must be recognized frequently for their good work to encourage them to repeat the performance. Praise for an employee must always be sincere.

Teamwork

Most people enjoy being part of a successful team. It is motivating for employees to observe "teamwork" and everyone trying to reach the same objectives.

Power

Some employees are motivated by influencing others. They enjoy making decisions and being in a position to lead and direct others. Differing talents of the various employees should be recognized and appreciated.

Leadership

Much has been written about leadership and reading the literature can contribute to becoming a more effective leader. According to McCabe,¹¹ there are 8 basic keys: (1) Integrity: always tell the truth and keep promises. (2) Trust: mutual trust is crucial for a successful

ongoing relationship. (3) Respect: respect the team and then they are more likely to return respect. (4) Fairness: treat all employees fairly and equally regardless of personal feelings. (5) Vision: have a tireless vision, communicate it to the team, and require that they understand and share in the orthodontist's excitement for the vision. (6) Optimism: always be positive: employees should not be exposed to negativity and be expected to excel. (Obviously it is necessary to be realistic so they know the status of the situation). (7) Decisive: make difficult decisions. For example, allowing an employee to perform poorly only discourages great producers. Maintain credibility by behaving as employees are expected to behave. (8) Teamwork: mutual respect, courtesy, and cooperation among all must be maintained.

Having Fun

People like to work in an environment that is enjoyable; they can become "burned out" if the work environment is "all work and no play." Companies like Southwest Airlines have come up with creative ways for employees to have fun.¹¹ If the orthodontist is not naturally good at coordinating fun activities, a key employee should be designated to assume this role.

Rewards, Recognition, and Appreciation

Those actions that are wished to be repeated should be rewarded. Recognizing individuals for work well done and showing appreciation, such as "thank you," are strong motivators. Praise must be specific and as immediate as practical. The desired behaviors should be reinforced and the undesirable ones discouraged. Giving employees gifts and scheduling time for fun activities in the community as surprises can also be motivating.

Recently, *Dental Assisting Digest* asked a simple question of their subscribers, ie, if they could change one thing about their day at work, what it would be. The following are the responses, and showing appreciation is near the top:¹²

- Shorter work hours, 7.0%
- Longer lunch hour, 4.7%
- More appreciation, 34.9%
- Fridays off, 9.3%
- Better pay/benefits, 44.2%

Retaining a Long-Term Employee

Commonly, new employees initially are motivated by the team atmosphere, the excitement of a new opportunity, and potential for rapid financial gain, to name a few. At some point, a valued employee is at the top of their pay scale and standard benefit potential, and the job can become routine, and the orthodontist can take the employee for granted by focusing nearly all efforts on the challenges in the office. A recent *Society for Human Resource Management* press release revealed the answer to the question of what people plan to do when the job market rebounds. "The majority of the Human Resource professionals and managers surveyed agreed that turnover will rise significantly once the job market improves."¹³ Employees cited the following 3 top reasons they would begin searching for a new job:

- 53% seek better compensation and benefits;
- 35% cited dissatisfaction with potential career development; and
- 32% said they were ready for a new experience.

The results of exit interviews with long-term employees have agreed with this research. Valuable long-term employees typically require a greater level of responsibility and appreciation to keep them challenged and feeling renewed. Hall¹⁴ has stated, "People tend to value and support the things they help to create." Involvement with decision making and recommendations for improvement can be a great way to create an entrepreneurial attitude, increasing pride and satisfaction with the job. Other examples of successful retention strategies for long-term employees include high level continuing education opportunities, autonomy, flexible work hours, a chance to change positions in the practice, and a creative benefit package that produces good outcomes for both the office and the employee.

Conclusions

Motivating and keeping employees requires effective management practices and strong leadership skills. Good operating systems and training are essential. People need the proper tools and support to do their job. A performance-based compensation plan rewards staff for their contributions. A pleasant work environment and positive

culture are important. Employees should be well paid, be provided benefits, have good work recognized, and have effective communication maintained. Employee prospects should be well screened to insure they complement the office. The creation of a harmonious productive team should be a high priority for the mutual benefit of patients, parents and the employees themselves. A pleasant working environment should be created. Ultimately, the management and leadership skills of the orthodontist will determine the success in providing an atmosphere where employees will be motivated to be effective and loyal.

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