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Maintaining a Winning Team in a Competitive Environment: Personnel Management for Today's Physician

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Maintaining a Winning Team in a Competitive Environment: Personnel Management for Today's Physician

Practice management for physicians is often filled with unexpected challenges. To physicians, full employment is something of a mixed blessing. While patients may feel increased financial security, full employment represents another aspect of medical practice in which physicians are trying to level the playing field with insurance companies, pharmaceutical firms, and the dot.com world. Full employment means that the best employees in physician practices are in demand by vendors and patients. Physicians are vulnerable to having staff members lured to new and expanding enterprises that offer career ladders, seductive benefits packages, and opportunities for travel. These incentives are virtually impossible for the practicing physician to duplicate. Evelyn Eskin of Health Power Associates, Inc., a local expert on practice management, provides the following suggestions and insights for physicians.

What can physicians do in today's world to retain their valuable employees?

First, take the time to learn what motivates each staff member. Physicians know that successful medical treatment depends on understanding patient needs. Similarly, successful team building in the medical practice depends upon knowing what makes employees want to come to work. Many employees are motivated primarily by money, including salary, overtime potential, and benefits. Physician practice employees, while not discounting these workplace incentives, often have complex work needs. These may include flexibility, social interaction, a feeling of contributing to a team effort, professional recognition, opportunities to learn new skills, and the personal satisfaction associated with providing good service. Successful employers will understand these motivating factors and develop incentives to meet specific needs.

What are some incentives that you have found to be appealing to practice employees?

- Provide business cards for each employee. This is good public relations for the practice and also conveys the message that the practice is proud that each employee is a part of its team. Business cards will include the practice name and address, doctors' names if feasible, employee name and title, telephone number and fax number. Staff members are often enthusiastic about having their own business cards; there is no evidence that doing this increases personal business calls or faxes during the work day.
- Select an employee of the month or quarter and award a special gift or privilege to this staff member. Recognition can include anything from a special parking place to a traveling trophy; gift certificates for dinner and an extra afternoon off are also popular incentives. The important thing is that the award is a positive statement to the employee receiving it.

- Acknowledge your employees' problem patients by having periodic case conferences for staff to discuss a difficult patient situation. Having a group session to solve problems with patient encounters is a good way to develop a team mentality among staff, to provide ongoing on-the-job customer service training, and to give employees the message that their work is important.

How important is the office structure and environment in motivating employees?

Very important. A second way to motivate employees is to provide the infrastructure that assures fair and equal treatment for all staff members. Many people who leave employment in physician practices do so because there are no consistent policies and procedures, because there are favored employees who are treated differently from everyone else, and because there is no opportunity for advancement. While physician practices cannot compete with large corporations in their benefits packages, they can assure that each employee receives fair treatment and appropriate pay.

What are some human resources basics that you have found to be successful?

- Develop a personnel policy manual that states practice goals, defines workplace rules and standards, and identifies policies around paid time off and other benefits. Make sure that this manual addresses legally required areas such as leaves of absence that are designed to support consistent treatment of all employees.
- Hold regularly scheduled staff meetings that allow time for open discussion as well as physician updates and departmental reports on items such as third party payor requirements and new clinical procedures. Make sure that attendance is taken and documented, and that minutes are distributed.
- Develop job descriptions and salary scales for each position so that all staff members will know the tasks and compensation ranges associated with different functions in the office. This will create opportunities for advancement within the office.
- Define a process and procedure for hiring new employees that includes developing a job description, conducting staff and physician interviews, a structured orientation, and a specified introductory period with goal setting and evaluation of progress. This will help assure that you hire the right person for the right job, and will provide checkpoints for both employee and employer to assess the appropriateness of personal fit and skill level for the position.
- Make sure that your salary scales and benefits package are consistent with the community standard in physician practices. While physician practices typically do not attract employees on the basis of outstanding compensation, they do need to be mindful of competitive opportunities. Benefits such as individually designed flexible hours that are less likely to be available in large companies are often very attractive to people who work in doctors' offices.

- Make sure that continuing education is part of your culture. Physicians assume the obligation of continuing education; support staff need to see this opportunity as a requirement of employment.

Staff continuity is especially important in physician practices to assure patient comfort and satisfaction. Employee turnover is expensive, disruptive, and demoralizing. There is much that physicians can do to demonstrate that their employees feel appreciated, needed, and useful in their jobs. Taking these steps may be the best way to assure a stable and motivated staff, which is in turn the best marketing program your practice can have.

About the Author

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