



Avoiding the dramas of absent team members: A crucial dental practice success factor

By Julie Parker

Ask any dental team member about what triggers an instant stress-response and they will say one of two things: missing lab work or a team member calling in sick.

Absenteeism, in many workplaces, is a minor disruption. But for a dental practice, it leads to real stress and even sheer panic. Dental practices rely heavily on every role being filled to effectively manage a day of patients. So when you are a team member down, you really do feel it. Unlike regular sick-leave, absenteeism is when team members take regular days off without good reason. Counselling a team member who is displaying absenteeism can be challenging because the reasons given are usually around ill-health and difficult for employers to verify. Doctors' certificates are easy to obtain and do not provide the assurance one needs when dealing with absenteeism. Indeed, when I owned my practice, I never requested a doctor's certificate in any situation. My theory was that if a team member was truly ill, taking them out of their sick-bed where they need to be for recovery didn't make sense. There are instances such as migraine and gastro when it is quite impossible to jump in your car and wait in a waiting room of a GP clinic.

For those team members who were feigning illness, I was curious as to why, upon waking that morning, they felt unwilling to come to work. Absenteeism is one of those areas in which you have limited control over the problematic team member. So, instead, let's look at the reasons why team members simply choose to take days off and what you can do as a practice to mitigate the risk.

Feeling bullied/harrassed/ under undue pressure

If a team member feels over-scrutinised and micro-managed, then a day off every now and then is a pretty attractive option. Fronting up every morning to a negative working environment takes a lot of energy. All that is needed is for that team member to feel less enthusiastic or just a little "under the weather" and they will opt for the easier path of staying home for the day.

Solution

Foster a healthy team culture. Create an environment where your team members are supported, educated and encouraged to feel happy and connected to one another. This reduces the need to muster up courage to come to work.

Checking in with team members frequently, by gentle and genuine enquiry, will also help to identify whether unhelpful behaviours are developing so you can manage problems early and swiftly.

I have written on healthy team cultures in previous articles that will also be of assistance to you. You can find these by logging into the dentalcommunity.com.au website and going to the Article Archive, or go to my website.

Going on a job interview

A team member who is on the hunt for a new position will need time off for interviews. Obviously, this team member will not reveal the true reason for needing a day off. They are less inclined to ask for a holiday/leave day in case the request is declined. Therefore, their only option is to call in sick on the day of their meeting.

Solution

Again, a healthy team culture creates an environment where good people want to stay. Of course, if it is a team member who is not suited to your practice, then don't resist them using sick-days for job interviews!

Stress/burnout/depression

Society is well-aware of the incidence and toll of emotional struggles. Life can become overwhelming and despite the best of intentions, a day off every now and then is needed.

Solution

Consider offering the chance for your team members to use a couple of days a year from their sick-days as mental-health-days. If someone is struggling, they can have a quiet word to you and together you can select a day and plan the roster around them. Your team member will feel cared for and supported. They will be able to use this day effectively rather than feel guilt that they have left the rest of the team in the lurch. And you will have time to ensure you are fully-staffed for the day.

Disengaged

Disengaged team members are not enthusiastic about coming to work every day and when they do, don't put in their best effort. It's easy for them to simply call in sick and spend the day doing something enjoyable.

Solution

Involve your team in the crafting and development of your practice goals. Ask them to share their ideas and provide opportunities for further training. Engagement levels will rise quickly.

Bad attitude

Team members with bad attitudes find it easy to feign illness and call in sick because they feel they are owed the time off or that the practice deserves to struggle that day.

Solution

A team member who takes many days off and also exhibits a bad attitude while at work needs to be moved through a performance improvement process. Initially, ask what is going on for them, especially if they used to be effective performers. Then state the specific examples that give rise to your concerns

and describe the changes you wish to see. Encourage the team member to be an active participant in the required attitude shift and provide any reasonable support that may be requested. If that team member has moved from a bad attitude to resentment about the practice, it is usually quite difficult to change this, so a parting of the ways is likely to be best for all parties.

every day. When I owned my practice, I considered our local temp-nurse agency as one of our key stakeholders. I wanted to be at the top of the list of clients they wanted to help when I called in need. So I paid every invoice immediately, gave the temps whom the agency sent a wonderful, friendly, enjoyable day and always communicated with the agency staff politely and with enormous gratitude.



Child care

My sister told me once that when their children are sick, working parents feel guilty no matter what; guilty for letting their workplace down by having to stay home for the day or guilty for not being there for their children.

Solution

Recognising that child care issues are a difficult situation for them will be helpful for parents to feel supported as they do their best to make arrangements. Consider helping identify all options open to them is also an effective method of support.

Putting effective systems in place to manage both legitimate sick-days and absenteeism is your best option to ensure you have your necessary team

As a result, I knew that when I received that occasional inevitable message that a team member couldn't make it in, my back-up plan was ready to be activated. If you're having issues with absenteeism at your practice, consider and investigate what the causes could be. Taking the time to create a working environment that team members love being part of will solve the drama of absenteeism and will likely be a huge practice builder!

About the author

Julie Parker Practice Success provides dental teams with coaching and training so they can work together and achieve successful outcomes for their dental practice. For more information, please contact Julie on 0407-657-729 or julie@julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au.