

# Hold On To Your Hygienist

## Five Leadership Practices that Get People to Stay

written by Kathryn Gilliam

### HOW TO RETAIN TEAM MEMBERS

Dentists from across the country are reaching out to Inspired Hygiene in record numbers for our help. One of the most urgent requests we receive is about retaining team members, especially dental hygienists, during these crazy pandemic times.

The impact of COVID-19 has compounded the problem of keeping talented dental hygienists employed. Hygienists have left the field for a variety of reasons, including dissatisfaction with the level of compensation, toxic co-workers, physical and ergonomic issues, unreasonable schedules, feeling undervalued and disrespected, negative practice culture, and poor leadership according to a 2021 survey published by Today's RDH. (1)

The ADA Health Policy Institute (HPI) has published numerous studies over the last few years addressing the impact of COVID-19 on dental practices, dentists, and dental hygienists. (2)

According to HPI data, there has been an 8% reduction in dental hygiene employment. This correlates to approximately 3300 dental hygienists who will not resume their careers in dentistry. These dental professionals join legions of workers across professions throughout the country who are leaving their jobs. 20% of workers are expected to leave their jobs in 2022. This phenomenon has been labeled "The Great Resignation." (3)

According to the Harvard Business Review, burnout was exacerbated during COVID-19. Many individuals used the time that dental practices were shut down to reevaluate their work-life balance and their level of satisfaction with their current work situations. Research shows that people who feel valued are more likely to report higher levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and motivation than those who do not feel valued by their employers. (4)

This is the perfect time to take a step back and evaluate your practice culture so you can create a place where hygienists feel valued and want to be. The shortage of hygienists will continue to be a factor for some time to come. (3)

Instead of leaving it to chance, take an active role in creating a practice that is so superior that your team members would never leave.

As a dental practice owner, you must understand that great employees will only follow a strong leader. You can become a more effective leader and retain your rock star hygienists by developing the following characteristics of a successful leader:

## **#1: COMMUNICATE A CLEAR VISION**

Your team is looking to you to share an inspiring vision that they can rally behind and follow as their mission. The vision is a reminder of the team's purpose and goals and should be built on your core values. The core values are common ideals such as integrity, honesty, and service.

A shared vision can motivate team members to perform at their best and develop a sense of ownership in the practice. An inspirational vision can elicit unwavering support and loyalty and can cement the team member to the practice.

## **#2: MAKE THE EFFORT TO KNOW YOUR EMPLOYEES AS INDIVIDUALS**

You can't meet people's needs, and make them feel valued, until you know what those needs are, and everyone has different needs and priorities.

Spend time getting to know each employee and ask open-ended questions to draw out the important information you need to be the best leader you can be for them. Check-in with individual team members regularly to see how they are feeling, what their current level of stress is, and what support they need in managing their workflow.

Team members will feel heard, seen, and supported, which will nurture their feelings of loyalty to you.

## **#3: CREATE A CULTURE OF TRUST**

Demonstrate by your words and actions that you live by your core values. A study by the Society for Human Resource Management researched more than 3,000 senior workers and determined that there are two types of trust that are fundamentally required for people to work together effectively: (5)

- Competence trust: workers need to believe that others will deliver and that the work will be high quality
- Interpersonal trust: workers need to believe that others have good intentions and high integrity

People need to trust their colleagues in both of these ways, so they need clear signals about what they are doing (actions), why they are doing it (motivations), and if they will continue to do it (reliability).

One of the most powerful ways to demonstrate trust in your employees is by empowering them to make decisions without your micromanagement. As long as you have created a clear Standard of Care, you may allow employees to do what they believe is in the patient's best interest within that framework. Giving dental hygienists this level of autonomy will result in higher professional career satisfaction and confidence. Employees will feel their opinions are heard and respected, and that goes a long way towards feeling valued. For help in developing your custom Standard of Care document, [click here to access a free worksheet](#).

#### **#4: BE GENEROUS IN RECOGNIZING AND ACKNOWLEDGING EMPLOYEES**

A study published by Gallup and Workhuman found that employees reported receiving recognition from their employer no more than a few times a year. When asked how often they would like to receive an acknowledgment, 21% said a few times per week and 59% said a few times per month or more. (6)

This same study revealed that the impact of more frequent recognition is very powerful. People who receive acknowledgement from their employer only a few times per year are five times more likely to be disengaged and 74% less likely to be at that job in one year.

This research established that private recognition is meaningful to employees, while public recognition expands the amount of recognition given and makes the employee feel even more valued. Another benefit of public recognition is that the people who witness this acknowledgment often reinforce it themselves, which results in a ripple effect that can be felt throughout the team.

One piece of coaching advice I'm known for giving my clients is to catch their employees doing something right and acknowledge them for it privately and publicly. Make it a habit of sincerely recognizing your employees for specific actions or character traits. Share compliments that patients and other team members share with you.

Approach the habit of acknowledgment with intention and effort. A heartfelt note of appreciation goes a long way. It's been twenty years since I worked for my all-time favorite boss, but I still have every handwritten note he gave me during the 15 years I worked with him. I stayed with him until he retired, and I would be with him to this day had he continued to practice because he regularly let me know, privately and publicly, how much he valued my contributions to his team.

Prior to team meetings, take a few moments to determine how you want to recognize the team and each individual team member. Create that ripple effect on a regular basis and you will reap the rewards of team members who feel valued and who in turn value their position in your practice.

#### **#5: ELEVATE YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Remember that the speaker is responsible for how the message is heard. So, if your employees misunderstand what you're trying to say, it's your fault, not theirs. Here are a few simple tips to help you improve your communication skills:

- Think about the message you really intend for your employees to hear before you speak.
- Choose your words well
- Express yourself with clarity and be authentic
- Don't accuse but ask questions instead. "Can you help me understand how/why this happened?"
- Use I statements, such as, "I need your help in making sure this won't happen again."

- Make sure your team members hear you say “I appreciate you” in as many ways as possible. Be creative and be genuine.

## **STEP INTO YOUR GREATNESS AS A LEADER**

To retain your engaged, productive, inspired hygienist(s) and keep them for the long term, step into your greatness as a leader! Share your vision, get to know them as individuals, show them you value them, create a culture of trust, be generous with recognition, elevate your communication skills, and offer competitive compensation and unique benefits.

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*Entice workers to stay with competitive and creative compensation*

These days many hygienists are being lured away to other practices by generous sign-on bonuses and high wages. You may need to consider increasing the salaries of your team members even before they ask, to make them feel valued and to ensure that they will stay. In addition to competitive salaries, I encourage you to find creative ways to add perks that team members will value. Consider the following:

- Performance bonuses
- Flexible hours
- Paid time off
- Lighten the workload
- Schedule breaks
- Provide healthful sustenance, snacks, and beverages
- Provide uniforms and personal protective equipment
- Offer paid continuing education or tuition reimbursement Establish a 401K and/or profit-sharing plan
- Provide insurance benefits, including life, health, vision, dental, and disability
- Offer flexible savings accounts or health savings accounts
- Encourage wellness, self-care, and fitness with subsidized gym memberships, massages, reflexology, salon appointments, manicures and pedicures, yoga classes, meditation and mindfulness classes, and fitness challenges Provide an onsite relaxation room or private nursing mother’s room.
- Offer professional coaching and career development during work hours
- Create an employee appreciation program
- Provide social support by subsidizing regular team outings

- (1) Hartley, M. (2021, February 27). The Today's RDH Pandemic Dental Hygiene Survey: The Results. Today's RDH.
- (2) Covid-19: Economic Impact on Dental Practices. Week of March 15 Core Results. (2021, March 15). ADA: Health Policy Institute.
- (3) The Great Resignation is not over: a fifth of workers plan to quit in 2022 (June 24, 2022).
- (4) APA Survey Finds Feeling Valued at Work Linked to Well-Being and Performance. (2012).
- (5) Ladika, Susan (July 31, 2021) In addition to dealing a blow to a company's culture, a lack of trust can sabotage productivity, engagement and retention. SHRM.
- (6) Bloznalis, Sarah (June 16, 2022) Employee Recognition Statistics You Need to Know in 2022



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