

ACG GI Practice Toolbox

Human Resource Management and Staff-Development in Your Practice: Hiring and Keeping the Best Staff

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INTRODUCTION:

The staff of a medical practice plays a critical role in the health of the business and may have dramatic effects on patients' experience. Despite that, many physicians were never trained to properly manage the people they employ or be the best leader for their staff. Happy staff means happy patients. Some of the most crucial elements of this process involves the hiring, training, appraising and compensation of employees. This ACG Toolbox article focuses on important aspect of staff management and development.

TOPIC OVERVIEW:

Creating a strategic plan for your practice involves setting a goal (likely a mission statement stating that goal), and creating the map on how to get to that place. Medical practices that can find and retain great employees who believe in that strategic goal will be crucial in creating success or failure. Hiring the right employees who are engaged to work effectively in your practice culture is paramount and should be one of the highest priorities. Excellent employees can accelerate and grow your practice, while poor employees can not only stunt grow and destroy good morale, but also potentially land you in the court house.

A. ASSESSING MANPOWER

A structured assessment of manpower is the first step proper hiring of staff. The principles of a manpower review are listed below:

1. Start with a review of the organizational chart. Does everyone have an immediate supervisor? Is the supervisor structure adequate, do supervisory positions need to be created or enhanced? Is there a clear chain of command?
2. Match staff positions to important tasks. Is the number of FTEs adequate to accomplish all necessary tasks? Are there important secondary tasks being neglected due to inadequate staffing?
3. Adjust the staffing plan to resolve issues in the manpower review. Consider the most cost-effective and efficient solutions to manpower needs. This might mean hiring temporary versus permanent employees or unlicensed employees for tasks that do not require a license.



4. Cross-training should always be considered as a less disruptive way to meet staffing needs. Each employee can be trained to function in a variety of roles. This increases flexibility and improves communication between staff members who will better understand the critical tasks and work demands of their colleagues.

B. FINDING EMPLOYEES

In the past, hiring employees might have involved posting ads in the newspaper and reviewing applicants by mail or in person. Now employees are more likely to be found online. They are searching job websites like monster.com, careerbuilder.com or even your own practice website. When posting for a new position include the job requirements, the expectations, the dates by which application must be completed, as well as multiple ways for the applicant to contact you (including on line through your website). Do not forget to highlight the benefits of working for your organization, and perhaps something that sets your practice apart from the others that might be looking to fill the same or a similar position. Another excellent and cost effective way to find employees is through your present employees. Consider offering a cash bonus to your current employees who can refer a friend. Staying in touch with former valued employees, who might return, or send new recruits, is also recommended.

C. INTERVIEWING PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEES

When interviewing job candidates for a new position, save everyone's time and let the job seeker know the salary range at the beginning of the process. During the interview, to avoid hiring the wrong person for the skills needed, use behavioral interviewing. The behavioral interview is carefully planned and based on the principal that past job performance will predict future behavior and the likelihood of success. Good behavioral interview questions are open ended, for example: tell me about a time when...; give me an example when you...; describe for me...; etc. (1) Interview questions should be tailored to the position being filled. A list of excellent interview questions for prospective managers is attached to this article.



D. THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT: THE 360 DEGREE APPROACH

Before practices can adequately train employees, there should be a comprehensive needs assessment for the workplace. There has to be recognition of what is needed against what skills your current staff already possesses. HR experts tout a “360 degree” evaluation and feedback process. This 360 degree concept can be applied to both the review and also the evaluation process. It entails more than simply acquiring an in house manager’s view of employee skills. Rather, ideally, feedback is obtained from those who work “above”, “below” and “with” the employees. These reviews would also include input from patients and customers, and would give an assessment to the medical practice trying to design the training programs in order to improve employee skills. Managers can organize 360 feedback using published standardized assessment tools, customized organization related tools, or hire an outside HR professional or training consultant.

E. STAFF TRAINING

Once the employee and employer’s needs are assessed and reviewed, an action plan for training can be developed. Adults learn by many different ways and each practice will have to develop the training plan that work best and is also economically feasible for their circumstances. This might include creating a course in house, buying off the shelf training manuals or computer programs, PowerPoint lectures or presentations, identifying an in house trainer, hiring outside trainer(s) or even consultants to develop the work staff in the appropriate direction that is desired. Another training method that should not be forgotten is the possibility of mentoring. Frequently physicians or managers are an ideal position for this type of training which can be formal or informal.

F. TRAINING AREAS

Training in important areas should occur periodically. These might include:

1. Customer service
2. Telephone call etiquette and protocol.
3. Infection-control practices
4. Patient confidentiality and HIPAA
5. Communication and Conflict resolution
6. Electronic Record System optimization



G. PROPER COACHING OF STAFF

According to author Leigh F. Branham, “Lack of feedback is the number one reason for performance problems.” (2) Most employees want to do a good job, but also expect to be told how they are doing within the practice. To be most effective, managers must give not only annual feedback, but rather frequent, ongoing communication to their employees. If this is done correctly, there is feedback throughout the year and then the formal annual or semiannual performance appraisal offers no large surprises. There still should be a formal performance evaluation which for the employee can also set guideposts for their work and allow for discussion about future goal setting. For managers (or physician managers in many cases) the assessment helps develop rapport with employees, allows assessment of good and poor performance, and likely identifies employees that should be given raises or further compensation.

Principles of Proper Coaching:

1. Coaching conversations should promote learning. It is best to use words like improve, learn, develop and grow. Doing this will help your staff develop their own insights.
2. Coaching conversations should start with a statement of your positive intention. You can do this by saying something like “I want to improve how we work together” or “I want to help you think creatively”.
3. During coaching conversations, always try to put your staff at ease and build trust. Try to make your staff feel competent and capable.
4. Ask questions of your staff and listen to the answers carefully. Approach staff development conversations as a learning opportunity for yourself.
5. Rather than immediately stressing details, focus on the result. This is a solutions-oriented approach. Ask questions like “what would success look like?”.

H. ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REVIEWS:

Annual performance reviews are a critical part of practice management and staff development. When used properly these reviews improve morale and productivity as well as support your practices budget, wage structure and organizational structure. It must be done consistently and documented properly. Performance reviews should be done prior to the end of the year (perhaps in the summer) so that budgetary planning, bonus items, and staffing issues can be planned in advance of end of year decisions. Many experts recommend semi-annual reviews. There are many types of appraisals: checklist; essay; graphic scale; group order ranking; individual ranking; and pair comparison that can be done and are defined elsewhere (1).



Tone of the review is important. Managers should communicate in a positive tone while allowing for clearly delineating both the employee strengths and weaknesses with specifics as related to their job. Job results should be discussed and too many criticisms should be avoided. The meeting should not be rushed and employees should be given ample time to actively participate. Ideally at the meetings end there would be mutual problem solving of issues and also mutual goal setting for the next review period. At the end of the review, employees should sign and date the form. Confidentiality on both sides should be stressed and the employee should be reminded that the evaluation process is continuous throughout the year and the door is open to discuss employee performance and improvement of the practice.

Principles of Effective Performance Reviews:

1. Performance reviews should be done at least annually, best early in the year or Summer. Many experts recommend semi-annual performance reviews.
2. A budget should be set by your practice leadership for raises.
3. Raises should always be tied to the performance reviews.
4. Each employee's performance review should include an action plan to be accomplished by the next year's review.
5. Performance reviews are signed by the employee and the manager and physician leadership and added to the employee file.
6. A copy of the review be should given to the employee.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:

- Do not forget that your employees are your most valuable resource. Treat them as such.
- Set a practice strategic plan to know where you are going and how you plan to get there.
- Consider an employee referral program. Your own present employees will want the new employee choice to reflect well on them personally and will have the ability to positively affect the practice culture.
- Keep in touch with former employees that you would consider hiring again, particularly if they left for another job or educational opportunity and might come back with new skills.
- To make the best hires have an excellent job description. Be a good listener and use behavioral interviewing: a systematic, analytical and objective technique to interview job applicants.
- If you want to increase productivity, start with a manpower review and follow with clear job descriptions.
- Take a proactive, personal approach to employee development. Endeavor to find ways to mentor the employees with the highest potential.
- Use continuous feedback in addition to annual or semi-annual performance reviews.



ATTACHMENTS:

- A. Sample Performance Review Form
- B. List of Sample Interview Questions for Prospective Managers

RESOURCES AND SUGGESTED READING:

1. Armstrong S, Mitchell B, The Essential HR Handbook, Career Press, 2008.
2. Branham, L. The 7 Hidden Reasons Employee Leave. New York,. AMACOM, 2005.
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8. Buckingham, M., Clifton D., Now, Discover-Your-Strengths, Gallup Press, 2001.

