

“DO I BELONG HERE?”

While attending the AAWD Meeting recently, I met some of the most incredible women dentists, women dental students and their faculty members. What an exciting blend of mentor-mentee friendships. The students were like sponges in a fountain soaking up all the how-to's as they contemplate getting out of school soon. The future seems like one big question mark to many. Will I pass the boards; will I find a job as an associate? Should I start my own practice, get the added experience of a GPR program or perhaps join the military? With so many options, it's difficult at best to stay focused on the other important challenges and joys of becoming a dentist.

One of the weaknesses expressed by the AAWD members and students several times was the inability to know whose practice to join, when to associate, how to be hired successfully and how to make the practice of dentistry a dream not a nightmare. Some young dentists inherit the existing staff members of the senior dentist whose practice they purchased or entered into as an associate. Some of these staff members do not meet the young dentists with open arms. In fact they view this young addition to their practice as “more work and nothing in it for me”. No wonder they don't go out of their way to make the new relationship work. The new dentist is at her wit's end trying to act, sound and look like an authoritative figure while being undermined many times by the staff or senior dentist. If the senior dentist and staff only realized that the new dentist is actually a great passive income center given the chance to succeed. It takes total teamwork for the associate to become part of the practice. If she is not accepted by Doctor A and the staff the patients will surely NOT accept her.

One of the ground rules of a successful associateship is for each person involved to know how important it is for them to play their role to perfection each day. The senior dentist must know that they may never criticize the younger dentist to the staff. The words from Dr. A's mouth must always be positive and encouraging, not critical and derogatory about the younger dentist and their skills. The senior dentist must let the staff know he or she supports the younger dentist at all times, no matter what. They may reprimand privately but must praise the younger dentist publicly. Humiliating others on the team is not the way to seal the deal of a potential buying partner. The more a human is told how well they are doing, the better they perform. With negative or neutral feedback, humans deteriorate quickly in the self-esteem department. Performance in one's work is closely related to how that person feels about their own work and the contribution they are trying to make.

Staff sabotage is another reason why the younger dentist is not successful. If the staff view the younger dentist as “the reason the office now must be open on Fridays”, or “Dr. A does not want it done like that” it is “how fast can we convince Dr. A that this is really not going to work”. While I would hate to think that sabotage could ever be intentional, over the 25 years I have consulted in private practices, I've seen more times than I would like to report. Just the way the phones are answered is a good indication that unintentional sabotage is happening. If a patient of Dr. A's calls with an emergency and can't get in to see Dr. A the staff may respond with, “I'm sorry Mrs. Miles, Dr. A doesn't have any openings at all this week but you COULD SEE our associate”. This already indicates that the associate is second best. The best way to answer the phone would be, “I'm sorry Mrs. Miles, Dr. A doesn't have a late afternoon appointment this week but he would not want you to wait. He would want you to see Dr. B who joined our practice since your last visit. We are real anxious for ALL of our patients to meet Dr. B. She is a REAL asset to our practice”. This response indicates the acceptance of Dr. B by Dr. A and the entire staff and puts both dentists on a level playing field by calling them both DOCTOR.

The role of the associate dentist is very important to the success of the relationship long-term. It will be natural for the staff to fall in step with the younger dentist as they view her as closer to their age in most cases. She is also an employee of the practice like them, and someone they can now whine to when they have a gripe with the senior dentist, an office guideline or benefit change they do not like. It is truly the “kiss of death” for the younger dentist to become real pals with the staff. While I advocate being a real team player and having positive professional friendships, there is a line that must be drawn. Both dentists need to make a pact that they will never allow the staff or one another to talk behind the others’ back about the doctors, patients or office policies. When this happens with the younger dentist being brought in to the negative comments, (and it will happen at one time or another), Dr. B. should listen and say, “I know how you feel but in fairness to Dr. A, I think he should be brought into the discussion. Do you mind if I arrange for Dr. A to join us so we can resolve the problem as a group? Refuse to be brought into the web of deception right from the beginning and remember, it takes two people to gossip. The one who is talking and the listener! Once the breach of trust and loyalty is broken between the two doctors, it is hard to resurrect the damaged relationship.

Before entering into an employee or associate relationship make sure these issues are discussed and agreed upon by the two dentists and the staff who can make or break the success of any practice. It works equally well in a military or academic setting. If staff are monetarily rewarded with one-time bonuses when Dr. B. reaches certain levels of productivity, the staff actually become excited about the new dentist and her contribution to the practice. If they also understand the benefit to the patients, the practice as a healthy business and ultimately themselves, they will go out of their way to make Dr. B. belong.

Linda Miles, CEO of Linda Miles and Associates, one of dentistry’s leading dental management consulting firm celebrates its 29th year of tremendous success by bringing out the best in each member of the team. Linda believes dentistry should be fun, exciting and rewarding for patients, dentists and staff.

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