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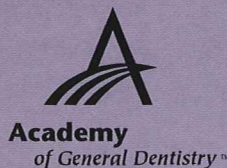
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Raising the Bar: Part Two

Reviewing Employee Performance

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Special Feature
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In the first part of this column (which appeared in the June 2010 issue of *AGD Impact*), we outlined the key elements of an effective performance appraisal program. These elements include defining job expectations, linking performance to compensation, and reviewing job performance. Once the program is outlined, it is time to conduct the actual performance review, which involves a face-to-face conference with the employee.

It can be difficult to master the skills required to conduct an effective performance review. You

must learn to listen, question, gather information, remain nonjudgmental, show empathy, be supportive, and provide feedback without being insensitive. Needless to say, these reviews are a delicate balancing

act. This article provides insights on how to conduct performance reviews in a manner that will elevate performance without alienating employees.

To give an effective performance review, you must understand that it has a purpose and has goals. The purpose of a performance review is to help you and your employees evaluate job performances. The goals of a performance review are to improve performance by maintaining acceptable behaviors and changing unacceptable behaviors, recognize superior behaviors so that they continue, take corrective action when employees offer marginal or subpar performance, identify growth and development needs that will further enhance performance, and establish a baseline for salary adjustments.

Do your homework

While informal feedback should be provided on a timely basis throughout the year, the performance

review itself must be a closed-door, face-to-face session with the employee. This type of formal review process should be conducted annually or semi-annually. All feedback should be provided at a private meeting and not through e-mail or voicemail. Do not involve other employees in this review process; doing so will only create hostility between employees.

Make sure that you prepare the employee by providing him or her with a copy of the job review document a week or two before the performance review. This gesture promotes two-way communication and eliminates surprises, as the employee knows in advance the subjects you plan to cover and can craft his or her responses accordingly. It is unfair to spring new issues on the employee at the review. Concerns with an employee's performance should be handled with the employee *when* the problem occurs; issues of concern should not be saved for discussion at the annual review. If you don't discuss problems with the employee at the time that they occur, you don't allow the employee to correct his or her behavior. Finally, make sure that you gather the necessary supporting evidence and documentation to substantiate your ratings for each task or item on the job review document.

Performance review process

Both employees and employers tend to be anxious about performance reviews, which can lead to awkwardness, stilted communications, and the avoidance of pertinent issues. To avoid this pitfall, you should keep the conversation at a relaxed level and be direct and candid in your communications.

During the performance review, go through each line item on the job review document. Ask for the employee's self-assessment and compare it with your job review document to see if you and the employee are in broad agreement with your evaluation. If there is disagreement, listen carefully to the employee's perspective. Be willing to alter your rating based on what you have heard. If

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you and the employee still disagree, state the reasons for your disagreement and provide supporting evidence and/or documentation. You also should refer to the work standards to see what criteria the employee applied in his or her self-assessment. Then, summarize the employee's performance relative to the key result area (KRA) criteria (the KRA criteria, the employee's self-assessment, and the work standards to which we refer are outlined in the June 2010 issue of *AGD Impact*).

The art of constructive criticism

Positive and negative feedback are both forms of constructive criticism, and constructive criticism is based on evidence, not on judgments or opinions. It must always be directed at a person's performance and not at the person. When giving constructive criticism, be specific and always relate the feedback to an issue of performance (e.g., attendance, tasks, behaviors, or results). Make sure you begin each assertion with an "I" message, such as "I have observed that your arrival times are past your assigned start time." Starting with "I" keeps the focus on the issue. By comparison, starting the sentence with "you" (e.g., "You have been arriving late") makes it accusatory and will put the person on the defensive.

As a rule of thumb, don't bring other employees' performance into the equation. For example, you do not want to say, "You arrive much later than everyone else," or "Susan does this job better than you." Comparing employees serves no useful purpose and can create jealousy and animosity.

You also should provide supporting evidence for each of your assertions. In the absence of supporting data or documentation, the issue can become more of an arguable opinion rather than an incontrovertible fact. Supporting evidence adds weight to the issue you have identified and can keep your language from sounding too biased—since, after all, you are only reporting the facts.

Don't "sugarcoat" your criticisms. You must have the courage to deliver good or bad news using direct, unambiguous language. Padding performance and ignoring areas of weak performance won't do you or the employee any good. It's important to express your concern when giving feedback on areas in which the employee's performance is substandard. Avoid harsh language, but let the employee know about the implications of his or her ineffectiveness to the practice.

Similarly, you should express appreciation when giving feedback on positive performance. Identifying what the employee has done well will reinforce these behaviors for that person. Give credit where credit is due—after all, people like to be noticed and appreciated for their efforts.

Employee growth and development

Conclude the performance review meeting by discussing plans for the employee's development. Use the information you have gathered during the performance review to identify areas in which the employee would benefit from additional training or coaching. To do this, you need to answer the following questions: How can you and your practice support

the employee in meeting his or her improvement goals? What educational or training opportunities would be appropriate? What skills need refining? When those questions are answered, work with the employee to identify one or two main areas for development and make it your joint objective to achieve them during the following year.

Resolving performance issues

If you and the employee identify and agree upon an area of poor performance, you should mutually explore ideas for a solution. Consider possible reasons for the deficiencies, which might in turn lead to ideas that the employee can utilize in order to improve. Work out an action plan with the employee and put it in writing, being sure to apply the following steps:

1 Specify improvements in the action plan. The plan should identify what the employee is to do and what you need to do to support his or her efforts. Include target dates indicating when the changes and improvements are to be accomplished.

2 Explain the consequences. Positive consequences might be greater autonomy, increased job security, increased pay, or some other form of recognition. Negative consequences might involve some type of disciplinary action or even termination. Clearly define the next step of negative consequences if the employee does not show the necessary improvement by the target date.

3 Follow-up and follow-through. Set a date when you and the employee will review progress. Allow flexibility so you can intervene earlier if performance declines further. If the employee has not met his or her objective(s) by the target date, you should follow through with the negative consequences. Conversely, if the employee meets his or her objective(s), you should follow through with the positive consequences. Keeping your word and following through with consequences, as promised, demonstrates reliability and trustworthiness.

When all is said and done

A performance appraisal system that is well-conceived and executed will help to improve practice and employee performance, foster ongoing growth and development of competent employees, and assist in the development of excellent service and care for your patients.

Although conducting an employee performance appraisal may be a stressful task for you, be aware that it's typically more stressful for the employee. By conducting effective performance appraisals, you can make the experience a win-win situation, helping yourself, your practice, and your employees to excel. ♦

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