

## SO, YOU'RE HAVING TROUBLE FINDING AND KEEPING GOOD STAFF



### Get used to it – and it will only get worse!

The #1 topic at my booth at the ODA ASM this past week was human resources!

When hiring, our clients say most resumes are from corporate office team members.

During the interviews, the applicants readily admit that they are unhappy in the workplace.

This is a leading indicator of an inter-office culture problem that is worsening in my estimation.

But who wants to hire someone who is disgruntled by the grind of the corporate bureaucracy?

### Why are they so unhappy and how can the independent office benefit from this cultural collapse?

Leadership, at its core, is fundamentally a human resource management endeavor.

There is no consultant or corporate mechanism that can lead your team better than you.

The strongest teams are usually found in owner-operated practices.

You must be a leader, and you must be present, daily, to do it well.

Leadership from a distance is nothing but bureaucracy in the eyes of the line workers.

Ask anyone working in an office where the management sits in an ivory tower far away.

The news is not good.

No one likes to be managed from afar or by a business designed around sterile HR systems.

Want proof?

Look at the incoming resumes you get when you advertise. Identify the current employer.

You may have to investigate a bit because most staff state the name of the dentist they work for, not the company who owns the office so please don't be fooled.

### Are you having problems with HR?

Believing that you can sell your practice to a corporate entity and that people in ivory towers will suddenly fix all your human resource challenges is not just optimistic; it's a little naïve.

But you need staff – now.



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## Where are all the dental people?

Thousands have left the profession and replacement rates (graduating class numbers) are horribly inadequate.

And you can also blame the recruiters who are offering signing bonuses to your staff for luring them away.

One recent case reveals that an employee accepted a \$25,000 sign-on bonus. Wow! That is what you are up against when trying to retain your effective team members. Months later she was bitterly unhappy and quit – returning to her previous employer for support.

Now, because of the 14-page contract she signed, she is required to pay back the sign-on bonus. Money has already been spent. They have threatened to sue her.

Your staff hear these stories. Many admit they are not happy in the dental office realm with all this aggressive recruiting approaching them.

Loyal staff prefer to stay where they are appreciated and comfortable.

But money talks – and these recruiters are given lucrative sign-on budgets to steal your team – even the most loyal may find it difficult to turn away from \$25,000.

So how do you compete with this toxic HR thievery?

Let's start with the truth.

Sorry doc – it's you, not them.

Yes, every office has a toxic employee at one time or another.

If you have one now – cut the cancer out – tomorrow!

They lose confidence in you when you keep that toxic employee on the team.

You must lead and lead with a firm hand. If you can't do it, find someone who will do the needful.

The reality is this: most practice owners have never formally studied human resource management.

Instead, you began managing staff the day you bought or opened your practice, learning through trial and error.

How has that worked out for you?

Have you made mistakes?

I sure have.

Mostly in the early years but even lately, after decades of HR trial and error – I did it again.

### **Entrepreneurs assume that people want to follow their lead.**

We foolishly believe that they are excited about their career working under our leadership.

Not so.

And the truth is sobering.

In the wide spectrum of career options, a dental office is no longer seen as a desirable place to work.

They never were, but today their appeal has dropped dramatically among the demographic that historically filled these roles, young women entering the workforce.

Let's be honest. Would you rather earn \$25 per hour as a dental assistant or \$50 per hour colouring hair in a salon enjoying a relaxed environment and social conversation?

Think about that for a moment. This is not an exaggeration.

Fewer young people are choosing dental practices as a workplace.

This socio-economic reality has resulted in short supply of assistants which will evolve into an even further reduction in dental hygiene.

In other words, the HR supply chain is grossly inadequate at the entry level.

And that is profoundly serious.

If you think it's bad now, hang on, it is going to get much worse.

You, the leader, should be ready to work more hours, 2-handed.

And you simply must sharpen your skills to retain the team you already have on staff.

So, what can you do?



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Here are some practical ways to improve your environment, retain your team, and even turn your staff into your best recruiters.

### 1. Start with yourself

Take an honest look at your leadership style. Some people are natural leaders, but the truth is most leadership skills are learned over time. Evaluate how your team responds to you. Do you foster collaboration, listening, and support? Many business owners struggle with listening and lack the patience to allow others to contribute to solutions. So, as a result, they stop listening, start dictating, and become autocratic. If that sounds familiar, acknowledge it. If changing your leadership style feels difficult, then ask yourself what systems you can implement to better support your team.

### 2. Rethink staff meetings

Do you hold daily huddles or regular staff meetings? And if so, are they focused on problems or progress? Too often, these meetings revolve around what went wrong the day before and how we need to do better today. Instead, shift the focus to recognition and wins. Highlight what went well and reinforce positive behaviours. Praise goes a long way!

### 3. Improve the work environment

Many dental practices feel outdated or uninspiring. Compare that to spas or hair salons, spaces that feel fresh, calming, and welcoming. As consumers, we want to go to those places and so do your patients. Patients notice. But more importantly, so do your staff. Having visited thousands of dental practices, I can think of a handful where I would personally want to work. That should tell us something. Invest in your workplace. Improve the aesthetics. Create an environment that energizes you and your team. These investments often pay for themselves and then some when it comes time to sell. The bottom line is, invest in your leaseholds.

### 4. Upgrade your uniforms

What do your team members wear to work? Too many uniforms feel dull and clinical. This is not a hospital. It is a healthcare environment, yes, but it does not need to be sterile. Spend a little extra money on the uniforms. Let your staff help choose their uniforms. Increase the budget and aim for something stylish and comfortable. Appearance matters more than you think. Dress for success.

### 5. Proper benefits packages

It's time to get serious about benefits. Many dental practices still lag other industries. While benefits in other sectors may represent 15 to 30% of annual income, dental practices average less than 5%. Free dentistry is appreciated, but asking staff to pay lab fees should be reconsidered. Ask your team what other benefits matter most and build your package accordingly. Eyeglasses, corrective footwear, chiropractic?

### 6. Pay more

While there are published, industry benchmarks for wages consider becoming the practice known for paying the best in your area. Higher pay does not guarantee better hires, but it will improve retention. While increased wages will impact overhead, the cost of staff turnover is often far greater and far more damaging to practice value. Pay more and secure practice value.

### 7. Rethink bonuses

Make bonuses random, unexpected, and generous. Forget the complicated formulas and calculations tied to collections or new patients. Instead, reward your team when it feels right. It's like getting flowers when you least expect them – it works!

### 8. Invest in yourself, not gurus

Stop relying on consultants who promise to solve your staffing issues. Instead, invest in your growth. Spend time and money developing your leadership and HR skills. Sometimes you just need to take a break, slow down, and cool your jets. Also remember your staff are not business owners. They do not share your level of risk tolerance nor drive. Be realistic. Be patient. Be human.

### 9. Manage stress and behavior

Dentistry is a high-stress profession, and it shows. Losing your temper, even once, can damage trust for years. Staff remember those moments. When there is a cancellation or downtime, do not react with frustration. Use that time to connect. Sit with a team member.



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Go for a walk. Have a real conversation. Those 30 minutes can do more for retention and morale than chasing lost revenue ever will. Culture is built in these moments.

### 10. Reallocate your marketing budget

Consider this. What if you paused your external marketing for a year and invested that money into your team instead? Your staff are your greatest asset and your largest expense. Investing in them will yield far greater long-term returns than any marketing campaign. Think of it as HR insurance.

#### Part Two: Competing in Today's Market

Recruiters are offering increasingly aggressive packages, and you must compete.

- Cover travel costs between office locations if more than one
- Guarantee minimum paid hours
- Offering bonuses of up to \$5,000 to new hires
- Pay referral bonuses to existing staff if they help identify a recruit
- Offer flexible schedules and reduced evenings or weekends
- Subsidize childcare
- Give employees their birthday off with pay
- Provide gym membership or personal training
- Offering professional photos, including family options
- Arrange on-site services such as oil changes or wellness days
- Bring in a massage therapist a few times a year
- Provide gift cards randomly when someone excels at anything meaningful
- Offer non-dental continuing education (lunch-and-learns) such as financial planning

As a reminder: recruiters, often financed by corporate groups, are actively targeting your team right now.

Please take this seriously. They are on the prowl for your best! And they have little regard for anything but the spread sheet.

Yes, I said it – these big firms are ruthless and sterile in their business tactics.

If anyone can prove me wrong – I encourage a public debate.

No “corporate-speak” please. No propaganda – real stories from real team members (not paid actors) who are honestly happy.

So, what will you do tomorrow?

Put out an ad. I hear Indeed works well.

Look at the resumé and find out where they work – and who owns the office.

Interview. Ask them why they want to leave the current office.

Let them feel safe and the truth will be revealed.

My advice for you with respect to your staff – starting tomorrow:

1. Reward them. There are dozens of ways to do that.
2. Making it random and sincere.
3. Invest in them with CE they need – not the same old basics. Financial planning for families works well.
4. Motivate yourself to be a better leader. There are dozens of online courses.

Try something new.

Re-energize your office.

That is what defines great leaders and great businesses.  
It is a never-ending journey to be a great leader.

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