



# HR 411

## Let's Not Just Get Along

BY GINNY HEGARTY, SPHR

“**T**his is by far the most stressful part of my practice.” Over and over again, year after year, this is how doctors describe managing their teams and dealing with office politics and drama. As these doctors explain how the situation has gotten so heated, they express overwhelming regret that their *Field of Dreams* parody “If I ignore it, it will go away,” has not been successful.

Many of these same dentists will confess that they harbor a secret fantasy to “Just Do Dentistry.” While this may seem like a pretty tame confession, compared with admissions of late from Arnold Schwarzenegger and Anthony Wiener, I can tell you from experience that the consequences of living out this fantasy can be just as dire and explosive.

The ultimate baptism by fire for most, it is a daunting reality for practitioners to realize that the day they opened their dental practice they also became a business owner, employer, leader and manager of a team. With little or no formal training in these additional roles, most dentists focus on dentistry and leave the teamwork to the team. “Can’t we all just get along?” becomes an overriding mantra for teams and that may be exactly what starts trouble brewing.

Take a look at this list of stressors that has prompted doctors to contact me, on just one day a few months ago:

- One key member of the team quit on voicemail overnight
- Two assistants are having an all-out screaming match in sterilization
- The new hygienist has just discovered that her license has expired
- This is the first day back from a continuing education course, doctor is all revved up and ready to go, then she is reminded that her main assistant is on vacation this week
- Doctor escorts a new patient, ready to schedule treatment, into the consult room to find a team member is eating her lunch in the room that now

smells like a fast food restaurant - not exactly the ambiance of choice

- The employee who was let go last week has returned, unannounced and emotional to ‘get her things’ in full view of patients in the reception area
- After running behind all morning, doctor is ready for a new patient consult and his treatment coordinator has already gone to lunch
- A new hire is in need of far more training and development than anticipated
- A team member wants to talk at lunch, she is red-faced and has obviously been crying
- The bookkeeper reports that payroll is up due to unauthorized overtime... again

**HORRIFYING:** Five of the ten issues above occurred in the same practice, on the same day, to the same doctor, within a span of thirty minutes! Yes, that’s horrifying, but I’m willing to bet that many of you have been there and experienced similar mayhem. Chalk it up Murphy’s Law or if you’re ready, look a little deeper and we’ll discover what I believe is the root of these emotional hijacks, disconnects, oversights and poor decisions.

**ERUPTIONS:** Make no mistake; this happens in the very best of practices, with great doctors and great team members. None of us is immune, as long as we cling to the notion of artificial harmony that is so prevalent. “Just Getting Along” means that we mince our words, hold back our opinions, ignore personality conflicts, and deny our own uniqueness.

Basically, we promote conformity above the richness of diversity and we deny our teams the opportunity for the kind of growth and development that comes from embracing and or challenging new ideas and opening our minds to new possibilities. Pretense will ultimately go the way of the wind and conflict will erupt...usually at the worst possible time.

**IRONIC:** At first glance, it may seem ironic, but teams that embrace conflict are the most successful teams. Constructive conflict brings to light all the issues that already, and almost always, do exist and gives them a forum for discussion and resolution. It's unspoken opinions, upset, unmanaged conflict and disagreements not worked out that bubble below the surface causing motivation and morale to suffer while eroding all efforts to keep communication open and the team moving forward.

**KISS OF YES:** If you've ever introduced a new idea to the team and finished by asking if anyone has any questions or if they are all onboard, and you are greeted by a room full of shaking heads, no dissention and apparent unanimous agreement, that's your confirmation that your new initiative will go nowhere. Just like the proverbial 'kiss of death', I call this the 'kiss of yes'. Without team buy-in, everyone will go back to their own agenda, with the best of intentions, believing that their way is the best way. Individual agendas often fly in the face of the formal practice mission and goals.

**BLINDSIDED:** In many instances, these disappointing stabs at taking charge convince practice leaders to stop their futile efforts to communicate with the team. Other doctors, based on frustration they hear from colleagues, never even try to manage the team proactively. It is this lapse in leadership, direction and shared commitment that ultimately cause the hiccups and stress that interrupt our days and take us off track. In other words, as a result of artificial harmony, everything seems to be going along great ... until it isn't. Then, you're blindsided by how things went so bad, so quick. In reality, the warning signs and the stress cracks were there - the potential for trouble bubbling below all along.

**CLEAN SLATE:** What's a dentist to do if she can relate and feels that artificial harmony is alive and well in her practice? My best advice is to forget whatever has happened in the past and start fresh with a clean slate. I have two pieces of really good news for you. First, I can promise you that your best team members want to know what you are thinking. They want your leadership,

direction, and they want to be held accountable for results. The other really good news is that managing the team is not going to be as hard as you think it is... just make the decision to embrace your new role and let's move forward. Like most things in life, the hardest part is always just before you make the decision to make a change. This is no different.

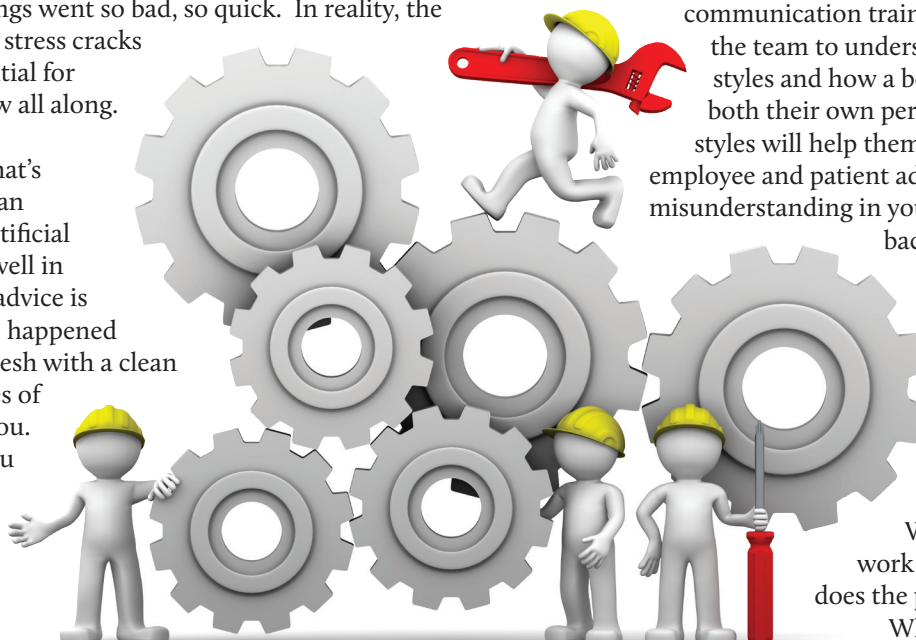
**DRIVING YOUR BUS:** As the business owner, your human resource (HR) responsibilities include: Talent Management, Strategic Planning, Personal/Leadership Development, Rewards and Compliance. In short, as Jim Collins, author of Good to Great would tell you, get the right people on your bus, make sure they are in the right seats on that bus, be sure to share with everyone where the bus is going and make your expectations crystal clear.

**TALENT MANAGEMENT:** Start by evaluating your team to determine if you have the right people on your bus. Realize that you are not passing judgment on whether or not someone is a good person, but rather on whether or not they are a good fit for your practice right now. When recruiting for new talent, follow the advice of legendary coach John Wooden, "Be quick, but don't hurry." Fully vet the best candidates and simple refuse to settle for second best. In future articles, we'll define just what is involved in fully vetting a potential new hire.

Once hired, be prepared to provide orientation and training (OT) for your team member. Whether your OT Program is half a day or several weeks, be certain to have a formal program that introduces your new team member to the practice philosophy, policy & procedures, and protocols. Assign a coworker to mentor the new team member and introduce them to their coworkers, join them for lunch and help them get comfortable. Immediately mark your personal calendar to formally meet with your newest employee during their 4th, 7th and 11th weeks to evaluate both his or her progress and how well your OT program is serving your new person's needs.

Mark your practice as exceptional by providing communication training for your team. Help the team to understand basic personality styles and how a better understanding of both their own personal style and other styles will help them to be a better coworker, employee and patient advocate. Most every misunderstanding in your practice will come back to a communication error. Honing great communication skills with your team will be time and money very well spent.

**STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT:** Why do you come to work each morning? What does the practice mean to you? What is your commitment



to your patients and community? This step is about bringing the team together to talk about your vision for the practice. It's about getting the team onboard, engaged and aligned with that vision and with the performance markers that will create success for all of you. Your 'right' team members have the potential to be your greatest fans and your best competitive advantage, as engaged employees are the secret to a happy, less stressful, profitable practice. They have this potential to be your greatest fans and your best competitive advantage only IF your team understands what separates you from the pack, so they can help your patients to see the value in choosing your practice rather than another.

**PERSONAL/LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:** You don't get what you expect, but rather you get what you accept. A strong leadership example offering both skills training and personal development training in leadership and accountability will be transformative for your practice. All performance can be evaluated according to talent, skill and knowledge. Once you have hired based on talent, it is your responsibility to support your talent to achieve or maintain excellent skill levels and knowledge base to excel in their role. Both internal and external continuing education programs along with consistent and regular team meetings are essential to your success.

**TOTAL REWARDS:** Compensation and benefits are set to attract and retain the best talent. It must work in that order. Rewards cannot make an average player a superstar, so enticing the average with more and better is a costly exercise in frustration. The 'bonus' pay will soon become the expected and any behavioral changes will be short-lived. Once again, there is no short cut for having the right people on your bus. Find those people and reward them well.

**COMPLIANCE:** A new and ever prevalent philosophy today is "It's better to ask forgiveness than to ask permission." You may have noticed the trend; you may even subscribe to it. As

an employer, realize that your employees are aware, too and may practice this approach to life and work expectations as well.

You may recognize the signs and symptoms of this phenomenon if you've ever walked into a treatment room to see your assistant or hygienist texting or Facebooking on their smart phone. I'm not kidding...I've gotten countless calls from doctors who need to control the use of cell phones in their practices. Complaints range from annoying cell phones ringing all day, to treatment room texting, to patients nearly jumping out of the dental chair when the "silent or vibrate" sound in a team member's pocket, positioned just beside the patient's head, buzzes much louder than expected.

Use of the practice computers and Internet connection have been the source of many wasted payroll dollars, as well as the cause for system crashes. You need to be crystal clear with your team as to your expectations regarding the use of phones and computers.

It is also critical that you provide a management framework by way of a policy and procedures manual so the team knows with a doubt how you run your business. This is the perfect antidote to unintentional overtime hours, milking the clock, lateness, absence, and vacation schedules that compromise practice productivity and profitability. A comprehensive, current policy and procedures manual will also bring you into compliance with the ever-changing state and federal rules and regulations. The world of employment law has changed dramatically in the last few years and you do not want to learn all about this the hard way. An HR professional can bring you into compliance simply and inexpensively. The days of 'this will never happen to me' are over – just ask your colleagues. This one is a no-brainer – Just Do It!

**A NEW FANTASY:** The most common reaction that doctors have once they have tamed staff management is one of a great sense of relief. With the monkeys off the proverbial bus, the team is now free to fantasize about the great work they will do together. This time, fantasy can be a dream, come true.



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Please feel free to contact me and share what's on your mind.

Ginny Hegarty, President of Dental Practice Development, Inc. is a Senior Professional in Human Resources and a practice management strategist, best known as a turnaround expert specializing in practice renewal as she leads new teams or teams that have plateaued to rediscover and build on their strengths to achieve new levels of success. Contact Ginny at 610-873-8404 or by email [ginny@ginnyhegarty.com](mailto:ginny@ginnyhegarty.com) or visit [www.ginnyhegarty.com](http://www.ginnyhegarty.com) to learn about her HR solutions, coaching programs or to have Ginny speak to your team, dental society or study club.