

## **Top Ten Ways to Constructively Critique Your Staff**

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As leaders and managers, dentists are often faced with the uncomfortable task of disciplining employees. Whether you need to help your hygienist improve productivity, address a conflict between two staff members, or discuss your receptionist's inappropriate reaction to an upset patient, you need to be cognizant of the impact your feedback has on your employees. Your gut reaction may be to yell, to use harsh language, or to hide in your office, but if your goal is to instruct, develop, and retain your staff, you can't rely on instinct. These Top Ten Tips have given me and my clients excellent results – they've improved retention and morale, increased productivity, and lowered the doctors' stress levels, and they can work for you too!

### **1. Critique the behavior, not the person.**

When you direct your criticism at the person rather than the behavior, you give the discussion a hostile, argumentative tone. Imagine how your receptionist might feel if you said, "You were really rude to that patient. I can't believe you let her leave without trying to resolve her concern, and I'm very upset with you." By directing your critique at the receptionist, rather than focusing on what was wrong with her behavior, your critique feels more like a personal attack than constructive feedback. What if, instead, you said, "I feel displeased with your behavior in the presence of our last patient. I sensed she was irritated when you raised your voice to her. Your interaction with our patients is a key part of their experience here, and I know we both want it to be a pleasant one." This statement focuses on improving the behavior, not on what's wrong with the employee. The receptionist's ego remains intact and she feels more compelled to "hear" and respond positively to your observations.

### **2. Critique the behavior *specifically*.**

Rather than deliver a broad-based comment, make your remarks specific to a situation; again, you want to avoid attacking the person and focus on improving a specific behavior. When your hygienist comes in late for her shift AGAIN, your instinct may be to say "You're always late!" or "why can't you ever seem to get here on time?" By being more specific, as in, "you were not on time for our staff meetings on the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 30<sup>th</sup> of this month," you remove your judgment from the statement and give the hygienist a concrete example of what she needs to improve. Get your staff member to acknowledge the specifics of the undesirable behavior, and collaborate to find a solution.

### **3. Begin with positive communication.**

Engage, don't alienate. Start off the conversation with something commendable, and your employee will know that you value her; that you have her best interests at heart. For example, tell her, "I feel you are an important member of our team." Or, even better, praise a specific behavior: "I admire the work you've done on updating the patient files. Your

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organization has been a tremendous asset to our team.” Make your comment sincere and honest - people will be able to see through a façade.

**4. Use “I” messages.**

When the word “you” is directed at an employee, be prepared for defensive behavior. When you use “I” and “we,” you demonstrate that you want to work out any differences, and you emphasize the impact of the behavior, not the deficiency of the employee. For instance, “I feel disappointed that you did not get the report to me on date we agreed upon,” is much less threatening than, “You missed the deadline for that report, just like you did the last time I gave you an important assignment.”

**5. Mutual meaning, mutual understanding.**

Make sure that your employee clearly understands the reason for your critique. Ask her to paraphrase what you’ve said, in her own words. You might ask, “Are you clear on why we are having this conversation?” or “What’s your understanding of this situation and my expectations?” Review any elements of the communication that are unclear, and document the conversation. Both of you should leave the discussion with the same understanding of what was wrong and what will be done to correct it.

**6. Empathize.**

Show your employee that you understand how she feels. Be attentive, listen, and ask questions about her feelings. Let her tell her side of the story, and be careful not to interrupt or get agitated. When your staff feels cared for and heard, they are more receptive to suggestions for improvement. Comments like, “I understand how you must have felt,” or “Wow, that must have been a tough decision,” will go a long way toward opening up communication and developing trust.

**7. Write, crumple, write.**

Don’t try to deliver your critique in the heat of the moment. When you’re upset, you’re much more likely to say something hurtful. Your words will have less of an impact if they are delivered in anger than if they are calmly and carefully prepared. Take the time to write out your critique...let your anger flow through your pen. Then, crumple up that paper and rewrite your critique more objectively. Once your emotions have cooled, you’ll be able to write more clearly and constructively.

**8. Carrots vs. lemons.**

Behavior that gets recognized and rewarded gets repeated. Set clear expectations of how you want your employees to behave, and reward them for meeting those expectations. Offer incentives to develop the behaviors you need and want, and the behaviors you don’t want will diminish. If your staff has not been asking for referrals as you have needed, and you want to modify this behavior, consider creating a game in which the person who asks for the most referrals during the month wins a full tank of gas, or 4 tickets to the cinema. The rewards don’t have to be huge to create a huge difference.

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**9. Just the facts, ma'am!**

Be short, sweet and to the point. Avoid lectures or long philosophical dissertations. Be assured, long-winded lectures will go unheeded. Be empathetic, yet brief, and resist the temptation to rehash old problems. Focus on what you observed, why it needs to change, and how you can help the employee do a better job next time.

**10. At the end of the day, let them know that “I support you.”**

As you conclude your critique, be supportive, affirming, and willing to help the employee make improvements. Demonstrate your confidence and offer to provide coaching on a regular basis. When you close with, “This will take some real effort on your part to improve, but I have a great deal of confidence in you. I want to make myself available to you during your progress,” you will see great individual growth.

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*Dr. Arndt is a Dental Coach. He works with dentists and dental teams to be highly profitable and completely fulfilled in their personal and professional life. What that means for them is less stress, more time, more money and a healthier business. As a businessman and entrepreneur, he blends 20 years of clinical dental practice, five years of executive corporate experience in the financial planning and investment management industry with his graduate business training and hands-on experience. He delivers his highly personalized Coaching to doctors throughout the United States utilizing scheduled telephone calls, e-mail and fax. To learn more about his telephone Coaching techniques, his group TeleClasses or to subscribe to his newsletter, contact Coach Ron at*

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