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TWO STAFF MEMBERS OUT AT THE SAME TIME NOW WHAT?!

by Dr. Chris Griffin

Double dip recession, health care reform, “Doc, we’re both going to be out for three months.” What are three things that scare the pants off dentists everywhere?

Let me tell you a story, maybe even a cautionary tale.

A few months ago a dentist found out that his two best front office workers would both be on maternity leave at the same time. This presented an obvious dilemma to his practice. I know you can feel the sympathy pains coming, but hold on a minute. Let me backtrack a couple of years and let you sneak a peek into the inner workings of his office.

This dentist had been fortunate enough to develop two of his chair-side assistants into true Superassistants. What is a Superassistant? A Superassistant is so good at their job, they can do any job in the dental office without relying on external systems. For example they can set up a root canal or bridge prep quickly and efficiently without the use of checklists or other systems. These creatures are rarities, but they do exist and this particular dentist had two of them.

The doctor had wanted to install a new system in his office that would allow the assistants to know things were being

set up perfectly without relying on their own memorization. The Superassistants resisted, feeling that they were good at their jobs (which they were) and that there was no reason to develop a new system. I can’t speak to their motives, but I think it would have only been human nature for them to think that the automation of the dental assistant job in their practice might lead to their knowledge and skills becoming obsolete.

The doctor saw that automating the chair-side assistant job had the potential to really help the practice and simplify training of new employees. The only problem was that he was a dentist, a father, a businessman, and any number of other titles that we dentists carry around with us every day. He believed in the new system, but he didn’t have the emotional energy to push past the initial staff resistance in the beginning. He persistently brought up the idea of systemization to his Superassistants. Eventually, he wore them down.

Still, the battle wasn’t over. The first two weeks of any new implementation are the toughest and his situation was no different. The addition of a couple of simple steps to the daily routine seemed to aggravate the current staff and the

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TWO STAFF MEMBERS OUT AT THE SAME TIME

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inevitable push back occurred. Luckily, the dentist had filled up his emotional bank account this time and he was ready for this. He coached, supported, and planned like never before.

When the dust settled and a month had passed, the new system was installed and the staff was fully on board with the new clinical style of doing things.

Then, the fateful day arrived. Not one, but two of the front office staff members who had presided over the office side of the practice came to him and told him that they would both be going on maternity leave within one week of each other. Whoa. Talk about your basic one-two punch. I'm surprised that the dentist was left standing after a blow like that. After he recovered from the initial shock, he did what all dentists do best... he didn't do anything.

The funny thing about a pregnancy in the dental office is that there are several months to prepare for things. This dentist had a classic trait that most of us share, procrastination. Yes, he figured that he would get around to training someone to do the front desk job, and put this future predicament in the back of his mind and on the back burner. But, nine months passes pretty fast.

One day, the dentist woke up and had all of his trained front office staff out for the next 3 months. Now, it was time for crisis management. He tried to put different clerical staff into the position of financial coordinator and treatment presenter to no avail. They weren't trained through no fault of their own. Who could the dentist turn to?

Well, like many Superassistants, one of the stars of the chair-side staff stepped forward. She didn't know everything about the front office job, but she thought she knew enough and was willing to learn. Why not? At this point the dentist was desperate and this Superassistant was plenty smart and motivated. She did not want the practice's production going down for three straight months. That would adversely affect her bonus pay and the pay for the whole office, so she dove in and tried to right the ship.

What do you know? It worked. Sure, there were some issues,

but insurance got filed, treatment plans got presented, and cases got accepted. The front office was saved.

What about the clinical side? Surely, the loss of one of the two pillars of clinical treatment would be bad for clinical quality, right?

What about the loss of both Superassistants? Yes, both of them. Soon after one of the Superassistants took the front office job, the second one left the practice to pursue other options. The worst case scenario for this doctor was unfolding before his very eyes. Note: Any true superstar staff has other options in life. Don't think that your office is such that no staff member would ever want to leave, that's just poor planning.

Now the practice is down two great chair-side assistants. Is there any hope? Remember back in the story. The doctor had managed to get the new clinical system installed into the practice a few months back. He decided to put his money where his mouth was. He took his secondary clinical staff and a new hire and made sure they were fully trained with the new system.

Then for the big test. Monday came. Guess what? The patient flow was just as robust as ever and his newly trained clinical staff never missed a beat. For the three months of the front office worker's maternity leave the office production didn't dip one bit. Sure, things might have been a little hectic for those months, but, all in all things rocked along smoothly. Finally, all the players returned to their rightful positions and things seemed like old times.

The real winner in all of this was the dentist. He now knows that his systems will hold up under the most dire of circumstances. He will never again feel like a hostage to the status quo. The newfound confidence in the systems of the practice gives the dentist a calm reassurance that the practice can handle anything in the future.

Maybe this won't happen to you, but better safe than sorry.

Dr. Griffin is president of the Capacity Academy, a dental assistant efficiency training program.

ASKING FOR RENT RELIEF

By George Vail²

Dr. Orange called recently to ask if I think this is a good time to approach the landlord for a rent reduction. Like so many other business operators in this recessionary economy, he has suffered a considerable slowdown in patient activity and his practice overhead is choking him. As a percentage of gross revenue, his occupancy costs have risen to nearly 9%. He's hoping that he can get the landlord to agree to lower his \$4,000 monthly rent down to \$3,000, more in line with the 5% of gross commonly encouraged.

Many people who rent professional space think that the landlord is fair game because the economy has gone south. For some reason, they seem to think that the landlord has scads of extra money and should be willing to accept less rent than the lease calls for. What they don't consider is that operating a commercial property is a business with all of the attendant income and expense issues that business people everywhere face. Landlords are feeling the pinch too. My guess is that many dental patients think that dentists have scads of money also and should be willing to give them a break on their dental fees when times are tough. What say you?

I explained to Dr. Orange that every rental circumstance is unique. And although there are a few tenants who are getting some form of rent relief, many others are not. And the degree to which a landlord will respond to your request for a rent reduction is a direct function of: (i) what you have to offer them as a quid-pro-quo for rent relief; and/or, (ii) how threatened they feel by the possibility that you may vacate the property prematurely (or not renew your lease when the time comes) if you don't get what you seek.

When approached by a tenant seeking rent relief, many landlords will ask a very logical question: "If I agree to lower your rent below the required amount now when the economy is slow, will you be willing to pay more rent than is required when the good times roll?" When I put that very question to Dr. Orange, not surprisingly he said "No."

Upon those occasions when a landlord does agree to help with some sort of rent relief, it commonly takes

the form of a rent deferral, as opposed to an outright reduction. In those instances, the landlord may agree to temporarily reduce the rent - perhaps for a year or so - following which he will want that deferred rent repaid - perhaps even with interest - over a corresponding period of months on a fixed repayment schedule in addition to the scheduled rental payments.

I advised Dr. Orange that, before he approaches the landlord, it is best that he first: (i) know exactly what each party's rights and obligations are under the lease; (ii) identify any and all other issues that he may want to discuss; (iii) establish his negotiation goals; and, (iv) develop a strategy for communicating his needs to the landlord. If the landlord has any inclination at all to work with him, his chances will be greatly enhanced if he does his homework and prepares a detailed sales presentation. He'll need to: (i) have consistently fulfilled all of his rental (and other lease) obligations faithfully and on time; (ii) clearly document his drop in gross revenues; (iii) describe what other steps he is taking to reduce his expenses and get other creditors to also assist; and, (iv) present a specific proposal outlining exactly what type of relief he seeks and stating why it is to the landlord's benefit to assist him.

If you find yourself in a situation similar to that of Dr. Orange and hope to get some rent relief, resist the instinct to just pick up the phone and call the landlord. Instead, know your facts, develop a plan of action and approach the landlord in a professional and courteous manner.



2 Winter Street
Salem, MA 01970
p: 978.745.6900

85 Constitution Lane
Suite 200 D
Danvers, MA 01923
p: 978.750.4500

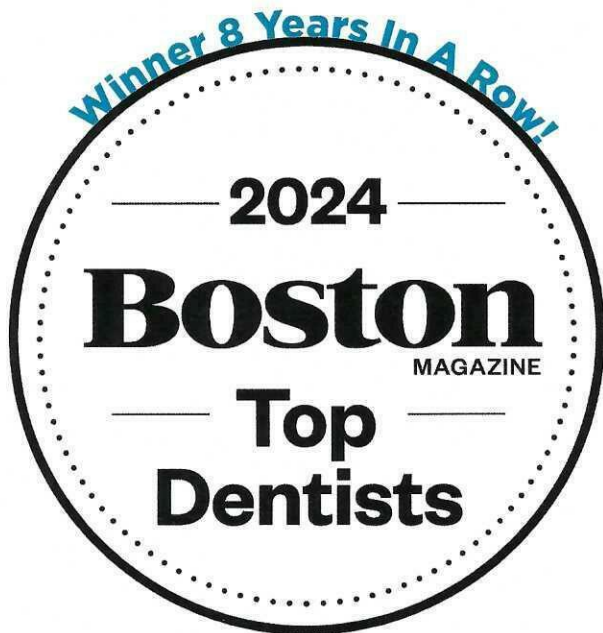
1 Merrimac Street
Unit 18
Newburyport, MA 01950
p: 978.572.4100

Arnold I. Maloff, DMD, ABE

Sandra R. Makkar, DDS, ABE, FRCD(C)

Carlene Tsai, DMD, ABE, MPH

Akshay Keerthy, DMD, MS



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