

# Slipping Through the Cracks

Don't replace the carpet if the roof is still leaking.

BY LYNN HOMISAK, PRT

*To Our Readers:* There are no foolish questions. Chances are that if you have a question or concern in your practice, others are experiencing a similar situation. We're here to help. PM [doctor and staff] readers are encouraged to submit questions to [lynn@soshms.com](mailto:lynn@soshms.com) which will be printed and answered in this column anonymously.

## Re: Efficiency Slipping Through the Cracks

Dear Lynn,

*It seems that every week one more thing slips through the cracks in our office resulting in another hit to our efficiency. I honestly cannot pinpoint one specific thing and wonder what it is that I am missing. What should we be monitoring to keep our practice from continuing this breakdown?*

"Slipping through the cracks" refers to things that go unnoticed or are unintentionally neglected, ignored, or not dealt with. It's rarely one thing, generally very different for each office, and results in varying levels of unproductiveness. Here are some common signs that lead to inefficien-

cy. Evaluate the role that each one plays in your practice. Remember that attempting to merely patch the cracks is not enough. Action steps to eliminate problems should be your aim. Don't replace the carpet if the roof is still leaking.

1) **A casual hiring process.** No one wants a revolving door of em-

ing an environment of confidence—which is what you want.

3) **Lack of proper training.** Do you want to re-invent the training wheel, roll eyes and agonize every time you hire and train a new employee? Creating a standardized program (with learning tools) will streamline the process. With a well-

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ployees. Avoid hiring shortcuts because they do not save you time, they are costly, time wasters, and result in hiring the wrong individual. Be picky. After all, you deserve the best.

2) **Lack of communication or appreciation.** Neither staff nor doctors are mind readers and yet there is often a complete breakdown between the two—without any interest in bridging the gap. Communicating leads to understanding. Understanding leads to clarity and teamwork, supporting one another and creat-

trained staff, doctors can confidently delegate more hands-on patient care, allowing themselves to spend more "doctor-focused" time with patients. The increased efficiency that comes from properly training staff will generate revenue.

4) **Weak systems and processes.** Sometimes human error is responsible for inefficiency; most times what guides human behavior or action is a process or policy that is non-existent, not enforced, too confusing, ineffec-

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tive, time consuming, or obsolete. You can't fix it if you don't know it's broken. Monitor your current systems, and if you find that several are not functioning properly, change them! Everything that allows your office to function is a process. Breakdown can occur almost anywhere. Don't be overwhelmed; address these policies one at a time.

**5) Weak Management.** Believe it or not, employees WANT (and need) to be managed. Nothing is as strong as leading with gentleness; in other words, be someone who will guide, nourish, and teach with realistic expectations. Micromanagement is a complete turn-off.

**6) Inadequate preparation.** The easiest way to prepare and anticipate each day's activities involves simply reviewing the schedule in advance. Of course, this review exercise is not an exact science, and yes, unpredictability still exists. Yet, intentionally choosing to ignore a proven "time-saving" measure is easily the

ing to an individual patient's clinical findings, protocol modification can occur at any time.

**8) Distinct role of staff.**

Cross-training and being able to fill-in for co-workers when needed is an essential part of teamwork. That should not eliminate the need for each staff person

to be crystal clear on one's individual assigned duties and expectations, where they need to be, when, and why. Job delineation should also consist of a breakdown of priority vs. secondary duties to reduce confusion.

**9) Starting each day on time.**

Starting late is the number one reason given for a schedule running behind. Preparing for each day involves doctors arriving at the office at least 15



back to when you started a new job (before you became a podiatrist, an employer, a "boss"). Do you recall what it felt like walking into a strange building, in a strange area, surrounded by strangers? Perhaps you were given a static list of new duties, some of which were peculiar. What was your experience? Were you uncomfortable? Left on your own? Hoping for better direction? Wishing for help? Or did someone welcome you, show you the ropes, walk you through it to help familiarize you with people, places, and things until you were more at ease?

Whether you were embraced or deserted, it's not difficult to understand how even a little assistance can be greatly appreciated. Developing and implementing an orientation program does exactly what its title suggests... it "orients" new staff to their new surroundings and helps them acclimate as newest members of the team. Why is this so important? Without it, your new staffers are lost and on their own; basically, set up for failure. Recall the experience of your new 'position' and you can better understand what they are going through. Conversely, assuring that they receive the necessary support will greatly increase their success, performance, with the desire to remain under your employ.

What is your protocol for welcoming new staff into your practice? If you believe you already have a good program, review it regularly, and continuously improve it. If you

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big winner in the unintended consequence category.

**7) Consistent treatment protocols.** A big way to enhance staff efficiency is to develop uncomplicated standardized treatment protocols. Knowing in advance what "is expected" in the treatment room gives staff a heads up in how to appropriately prep the room and the patient. It assures that supplies and instrumentation are within reach, procedure set-ups are ready, and rooms are equipped with anticipated DME items. Because everything is immediately accessible, it saves valuable doctor time during the patient visit and reduces having to call staff mid-treatment. Create protocols for your top three to five diagnoses to start, and review them with staff, with the understanding that accord-

minutes before (not after) the first patient is scheduled. This allows for adequate time to sort through messages/emails, take care of incidentals, get that coffee, conduct the morning huddle, and enter the patient's room on time. Can't be on time? Then be early!

**Re: Staff Orientation**

*Dear Lynn,*

*I guess I need a quick lesson in how to best acquaint new hires to office routine. Apparently, what I am doing is not working (or so I'm told!)*

You've heard the expression, "You can't really understand another person's experience until you've walked a mile in their shoes." Well, let's start by putting yourself in your new employees' shoes and take you

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have a semi-workable program, take the time to complete it and make it happen. And if you have no program at all, get started by crafting one for a 2016 implementation. It's time to take action.

Make sure they have the essen-

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## Remember, this 'newbie' may be your future star staffer.

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tial tools to succeed—a procedure handbook, an employee policy manual, someone to be a mentor, a note-

book for personal reference, a job description with desired outcomes, and an organizational chart (if a large practice) to understand who's who in the zoo. It's also a good idea to create a standardized welcome packet containing all necessary employee paperwork and instructions for completing it.

Don't feel the need to cram everything into one day! Take it slow. In fact, it's really best if they can have a week or so just to follow the doctor(s) and other staff around to see exactly how the practice functions. Give them time to absorb and apply this new knowledge. Encourage questions. Arrange follow-up sessions and reviews as these are a real advantage in the learning process. It's almost guaranteed that a staff orientation program results in time and cost savings, improves employee task outcomes, reduces stress and mistakes, and emphasizes teamwork.

Finally, simply keep in mind that Mondays are usually the most hectic day of the week and may not allow adequate time for you or a mentor to spend with your new employee. Start new hires on a Tuesday to let the normal weekly routine get underway, and give everyone a chance to settle in before bringing the new person on board. Remember, this 'newbie' may be your future star staffer. **PM**

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**Ms. Lynn Homisak,**  
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