



# Balancing the Doctor/Boss Relationship

Creating a balance between your doctor and boss roles can be tricky.

BY JEANETTE SMITH

Every podiatrist starts out with the same goal: bring quality foot care to patients and excel in the field of podiatry. While you were busy graduating podiatry school, you may have forgotten that you need an office and a staff of people behind you to achieve this dream. Sometimes, we get so focused on our role as a doctor that we don't develop our skills as a CEO, leader, mentor, and boss—not just any boss, but one who exhibits vision, strength, and genuine concern for staff well-being. Creating a balance between your doctor and boss roles can be tricky, but many physicians have found innovative ways to be sure their practice grows, just as much as their own skills and knowledge of podiatry.

Actions such as hiring an office administrator, avoiding micromanaging, crafting a practice mission statement,

and showing staff appreciation can make your transition between these roles easier. It all has to do with working ON your practice, not just IN it.

## Administrators

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employees do need someone they can come to with ideas and complaints. An office administrator can act as a liaison between doctor and staff. Administrators enforce policies and solve team member problems on a daily basis, minimizing interruptions to your busy

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roles can be easier with help from the right people. The healthcare industry has significantly fewer HR programs as compared to other work sectors—half the average of all other industries. While your office probably doesn't need an entire HR department, your

schedule. With an office administrator, your role becomes something more of a director than a boss, steering the business as a whole, but leaving specifics to your administrator.

“You're not looking for some-

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one to *manage* people. You're looking for an individual who knows how to train people and build them up," Peter Wishnie, DPM and Practice Management Consultant for



Dr. Wishnie

The Virtual Practice Management Institute, speaks from his experience. Adding an administrator to an existing office can be tricky. Help him/her enter humbly and slowly build relationships

with staff. If your administrator struts in with a better-than-thou attitude, existing employees may resent rather than appreciate the person.

Maintaining a balanced relationship with your office administrator can be easier than trying to direct an entire staff of people by yourself. Your administrator is not there, however, to take the blame if you make a decision that leaves your office unhappy. Surrounding yourself with other leaders who help steer your business is a great thing, but it doesn't mean you can return to being the doctor full time.

Without someone else acting as a

By lessening your daily workload, this person gives you more time to concentrate on growing your business and caring for your patients. As Dr. Wishnie reminds us, "You make more money by owning the cookie shop, not baking the cookies." Put a trusted and experienced person in place to lead your team, and then be-

new ideas slowly so staff can adjust.

Micromanaging is often thought to demand multi-tasking from staff, but guess what? Multi-tasking doesn't work. When employees are interrupted with a new task while being expected to complete the first one, their efficiency and accuracy for both tasks declines. Automated programs such

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lieve that your staff can do what they were taught under your guidance.

### Micromanaging

This brings us to the next potential pitfall of leadership—micromanaging. As a doctor, you are trained to pay particular attention to detail and be meticulous in all you do. However, you can't be the same way as a boss to your staff. Trying to control every step of every task in your office will leave you exhausted and your staff frustrated. If you have an operations manual and steps are being

as patient portals and text message appointment reminders reduce the need for multitasking by leaving team members with more time for other important tasks. If you don't have these technologies, consider how you and your staff might benefit from them.

Instead of micromanaging, try delegating tasks to staff members in accordance with their strengths. Workers make decisions based on how they were trained. If you spend more time demanding things and correcting mistakes than you do trying to cultivate knowl-



Dr. Titko

edge and good decision-making, you end up with employees who have no autonomy. Dr. Kristin Titko advises, "take the time to train your staff and keep communication open. Look for ways you can help them improve, but also listen to ways they can help you improve." Focus everyone on the end goal, but let employees find their own ways of getting there. Your guidance and the time you have spent as a leader will reflect in their work.

Of course, employees will need correction sometimes, but avoid concentrating only on the poor aspects of their performance. When you focus on the one mistake and forget to praise them for the ten other steps they did correctly, you bring down confidence and future work will suffer. Team members should

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daily mentor and friend to your team, you could have frustrated employees who feel they can't speak to you in your role as doctor. If you plan on running the show yourself, you need to make sure to dedicate time to listen to your staff as a director and mentor. This includes scheduling time to hear complaints and ideas and interacting with each individual on a personal level. Something as simple as taking off your lab coat can indicate to employees that you have switched from the doctor to the leader role.

The addition of an office administrator helps keep your roles balanced.

skipped, don't be tempted to add yet another step! Additional instructions often just add more confusion.

You probably don't work the front desk or restock the nurse's station, so if changes need to or will be made to tasks in these areas, you should first ask for suggestions from the people who do these jobs daily. Have a meeting to discuss procedures, make it known that you are open to ideas and opinions, then actually work on implementing those ideas. Making decisions abruptly or harshly and demanding changes can lead to bad feelings, so be sure to implement any

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be praised loudly and publicly and criticized softly and privately. During training, focus more on building up their strengths, not correcting their weaknesses. Studies have shown that building upon good qualities will in turn reduce the number of negative ones. Another thing that builds good work? Having a mission.

### **Mission Statement**

There is a story about a group of laborers who were paid to dig a hole. Halfway through the day, they were instructed to fill the hole back in. The next day, workers were asked to dig another hole and again, fill it back in. Although the pay was increased each day, fewer and fewer workers returned to take the job. Without a purpose, there was nothing the employer could offer to inspire them to dig the hole. Your employees are no different.

Any major company will tell you that a mission statement is critical to running a successful business. It's the same for any medical practice. A good mission statement should outline the goals of the company and the values you uphold as a team. If you already have one, great! Make sure your employees have a personal copy and post it somewhere in the office for everyone to reference. Either during a team meeting or one-on-one, discuss your vision with employees and see how they feel it connects to their tasks around the office. Workers will use it as a touchstone for their decisions and actions.

If you still need to develop a mission statement, make absolutely sure staff have input. Leave a brainstorming poster board in the break room where anyone can write down suggestions. Craft a few formal options featuring ideas from this list. Then let team members vote on which wording they like best. If they are a part of the formation process, they are more likely to integrate the mission into their daily work. Be sure to focus on specific values you uphold: honesty, integrity, respect, patience, etc. These words should define you and your staff as both individuals and employees.

Unfortunately, it's not enough to just set a mission and expect everyone

to follow it the same. Complementary to a mission statement are employee handbooks and operations manuals. This is where the broad vision is set down into specific policies and procedures. It will act as a working guide for the administration of consistent and fair personnel policies and serve as a reference for office procedures.

Whether you run one office or a dozen, a proper handbook will reduce confusion about the rules and place everyone on a level playing field. Handbooks should include ev-

logically follow that you should put employees first and your bottom line second. When you concentrate on the individual, you will see your business grow as a whole. After all, your employees are the ones who carry your business, keep it running, and ultimately impact the way your patients perceive you as a doctor. Having the best practice requires having a quality staff and retaining them.

Employee retention is the number one headache of employers today. If a team member leaves, you have lost

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everything from employee appearance standards to the course any disciplinary action might take. Think outside the office setting, too. Does your marketing plan involve charity events or other projects beyond regular office hours? Let your employees know what the expectations are for participation in these additional activities. The more you can cover, the better, so everyone is clear on where the company is going and the rules and plans for getting there.

Additionally, an operations manual outlines the way daily functions are completed around the office. While an employee handbook should be written by physicians and administrators, the ops manual should be left to those who actually perform those duties daily. Keep both of these documents updated with a minimum of a yearly review. Having a defined set of rules that everyone understands and a quick reference for daily tasks can work wonders to diminish the amount of time you need to be the boss and free your time to be a mentor, friend, and of course, a doctor.

### **Showing Appreciation**

You've done a lot of work up to this point, but your balancing act isn't over yet. If you claim to treat patients first and feet second, then it would

the time and knowledge you invested in them and are forced to go through the arduous process of hiring again. Finding properly qualified candidates is a challenge for every physician. Additionally, your remaining staff now have the added responsibility of training a new team member.

So how do we keep them around? Easy—show appreciation. This will manifest differently in every office, but the point is to do something about it now to avoid losing staff in the future. Participants in a Paychex survey indicated that both low salary (69%) and unfair workload (63%) were their primary motivations for leaving a current position. When was the last time you took a look at payroll or scheduling? Even if you hired an office administrator to take care of those tasks, you still need to be the boss and determine for yourself if your employees are being treated fairly and compensated properly. If someone is stressed about workload or money, it can bring negative attitudes into the office that rub off on others.

As a doctor, you know how to connect with patients in the treatment room. Many of these same listening and problem-solving skills can be applied to your role as leader, but the lines between each role need to

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be defined clearly for your team. Don't just *fit in* being a boss in the short time between patients. Schedule it as a priority by holding regular team meetings, keeping open office hours, or crafting other fun and team-building activities. During this time, get to know employees on a personal level and help them get to know you. Switching from doctor to boss takes focus, so concentrate on being one or the other, not both at once.

Showing appreciation doesn't need to be flashy or expensive. Give each staff member their own business card with a title. Positions like Patient Outreach Specialist or Insurance Goddess sound more fun and impressive than Receptionist or Billing. This is an easy way of telling your employees that you appreciate their unique role within your office and you want to keep them around. Employees also like being recognized as individuals. Put a staff bio page on your website with photos and blurbs about your team. Include exciting life updates in your newsletter or share stories during office meetings. Don't forget birthdays and work anniversaries! Celebrate by bringing breakfast for everyone or have flowers waiting on that person's desk. Small gestures can boost office morale and keep employees around.



Dr. Ornstein

Big gestures are appreciated too. Your staff should feel like their daily work is recognized and rewarded. Mid-year or end-of-the-year bonuses are a great way to let employees know the value of the work they do. Your employees may appreciate additional time off or having a big holiday party for the office. Figure out what your staff want most and be generous with it. You will see your investment in their happiness reflected in the positive trajectory of your business.

Perhaps the easiest, and yet most important, way to show appreciation is through verbal praise. Each and every staff member is important and should be made to feel so daily. Dr. Hal Ornstein, President and COE of NJ

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**“To train myself, I would put ten coins in my left pocket each morning. Every time I complimented a staff member, I would move one coin to my right pocket. I would never leave the office until all ten coins were in my right pocket.”—Hal Ornstein, DPM**

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Podiatric Physicians and Surgeons group LLC, has an extra little trick up his sleeve for showing appreciation. “To train myself, I would put ten coins in my left pocket each morning. Every time I complimented a staff member, I would move one coin to my right pocket. I would never leave the office until all ten coins were in my right pocket.” Recognizing them for their achievements is a crucial aspect of keeping your employees upbeat and positive. Why should we do all this? Because having quality staff matters.

You matter, too! Finding the proper balance between your time as a doctor and your time as an employer ultimately reduces your workload and gives you a chance to stretch your business acumen to build up your practice. You don't need an MBA to be an effective leader. Read a few books, talk to other doctors about their experiences, surround yourself with a good group of people, and be ready for some trial and error of your own. Soon enough you'll find your ..... balance. PM

### Reference for Paychex Survey:

<https://www.inc.com/peter-economy/15-reasons-why-people-quit-their-jobs-and-what-you-can-do-about-it.html>



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