

Make Your Staff Meetings Meaningful

Otherwise, why bother?

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 soslynn@gmail.com which will be printed and answered in this column anonymously.

Topic: Oh, the Games People Play

Dear Lynn,

Do you have any ideas on how I can convince my doctor to make our staff meetings more productive AND meaningful? Our monthly sessions are mind-numbing because the things that the doctor talks about rarely concern us. He speaks, we listen (when we're not falling asleep), and nothing is accomplished. It seems that this wasted time could be more useful if we could discuss (and fix) some of the issues that affect all of us on a daily basis. I could think of a dozen off the top of my head!

Staff meetings have a definite upside. They are, in fact, an extremely valuable tool if properly conducted. It serves a multi-purpose role in practice management and efficiency. Significant changes can happen while sitting together as a team to

openly discuss and share ideas.

But you hit on a downside: that is, carving out an hour or so just to have a staff meeting with no set agenda and zero interest is a waste of precious time that could otherwise be spent on patient care. Especially if it does not result in significant advanc-

vance of the meeting, request that everyone submit in writing two or three real-life practice-related issues to whomever is in charge—doctor, office manager, etc. Again, in preparation for meeting day, the organizer transfers each collected issue onto a 3 x 5 index card and on the day of

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es within the practice. Unless staff meetings are meaningful, participatory, well-managed, and conclude with positive outcomes, why bother?

There is a way of turning your ineffective do-nothing meeting into a purposeful workspace, where everyone can and will benefit. Aside from encouraging group participation, it enables lively discussion around the most effective solutions to everyday problems—front office, back office, patient issues, daily scheduling flow, customer service, inefficiency, etc. No one will fall asleep, and the room will be filled with positive learning and laughter, strengthening internal cultural ties as well.

Here's the way this works. In ad-

the meeting, stacks the cards on the conference table, face down. Going around the room, each staffer draws a card and reads it aloud for all to hear. She or he must then offer a solution to the issue. Following that, ask if anyone else wants to suggest a different way of handling it. Discussion ensues and the one solution that is agreed upon becomes policy moving forward. Move on to the next issue. Everyone gets a chance to pick and read a card and offer their idea of a solution-based response.

Of course, this exercise can fill an entire staff meeting session or, depending on timing, can be added on to the planned agenda items, tackling

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just two or three every meeting. Staff members are encouraged to continue contributing situations they may have faced or observed before each meeting date, consistently growing the “issues” pile. There never seems

chosen and turned into policy. It’s a nice reward.

To get the ball rolling, refer to some of the more recognizable scenarios that generated a lot of head nodding, raised hands, and group feedback in the workshops.

Vignette #1: Your patient just

ever learn how to schedule patients?” How do you handle this personal attack in a professional manner?

Vignette #3: Your patient, Mr. Impossible, refuses to complete all the information on the new patient intake form. Says he doesn’t see the purpose and asks, “Why do you need to know ALL THESE DETAILS when I’m only coming in to have my nails cut?!”

Vignette #4: Your doctor has been in the room with Mrs. Chatterbox for ½ hour longer than he/she should have been. What sure-fire method do you propose that will get him/her out of the room and keep the schedule on time without insulting the patient?

Vignette #5: You have just taken on an associate in the practice, but patients do not want to schedule with him/her. How do you convince them the “new” doctor is a capable, competent clinician in an attempt to fill their schedule?

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to be a lack of issues. And, despite practice differences nationwide, many of the problems you’ll hear are (not surprisingly) very relatable across the country.

To add to the fun, playfully toss a (clean) pair of brightly colored socks to everyone who willingly participated in offering solutions. Similarly, you might consider gifting a token bonus to the person whose idea was

blacked out; fainted in the treatment chair while he waited to receive an injection. What do you do? What is the practice protocol for a medical emergency?

Vignette #2: Your patient just reprimanded you for making her wait an hour to be seen. Said, “Every time I come to this office, I have to wait! I never wait this long in any of my other doctor offices! Didn’t you people

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Vignette #6: Mrs. Right calls to say she just banged her foot on the coffee table—you tell her she should come right in, but she responds, “I can’t...I have a hair appointment. I will come in after that. What time do you close? I’ll be your last patient.” How do you respond?

These few vignettes are only a drop in the bucket. Use this time wisely, make some progress, stay awake, and HAVE FUN—all at the same time!

Topic: Game-Changing Staff Incentives

Dear Lynn,

Apparently, my method of throwing more money at my staff is not a foolproof incentive plan. If money is not it, then what is?



fee? He nailed it because he made the effort to pay attention. I was impressed. And touched. And it was effective.

A thoughtful gesture could be as simple as that or remembering a birthday or work anniversary and celebrating the occasion by taking them out to lunch. Or, occasionally buying an indulgent treat or a bag-o-bagels for the staff in the break room. Also, do not underestimate the impact that greeting

So how do you find out what those drivers are? It is not rocket-science. It involves very little effort on your part; and some won't even cost you a dime. What it will do is give rise to meaningful incentives that are appreciated, motivating, and prove to be both eye-opening and worthwhile.

Simply create a brief, written survey, in which you request their feedback. This survey, for example, might include questions concerning:

- Their birthday,
- Personal and professional goals,
- How would they improve in the practice (if they were given a magic wand)
 - Their personal and professional aspirations
 - What do they consider their main asset/strength to be
 - Their main weakness
 - Introduce their family members [optional]
 - Pet(s)
 - Favorite food(s), snack(s), type of music, entertainer, restaurant, sport
 - What irritates them
 - What makes them smile
 - Hobbies

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There is more to motivating staff than merely raising wages. While fair wages do play a significant role in a healthy incentive program, it must directly relate to productivity. If it doesn't, the incentive is short-lived and becomes nothing more than an expectation, just for showing up.

In addition to dangling a cash carrot, employees also need to feel that work is enjoyable. What might that look like? Exceptional training, so they can sharpen skills and have an opportunity to excel in what they do, challenging but achievable work, respect from employers and peers, job security, frequent (genuine) praise and appreciation, and a comfortable and rewarding social and physical environment.

The most powerful motivators are spontaneous, original, and heartfelt acts of kindness. For me, it was arriving at the office on a cold Monday morning and finding a cup of hot coffee awaiting me on my desk. How did my doctor know how I drank my coffee?

He nailed it because he made the effort to pay attention. I was impressed. And touched. And it was effective. Each of the above examples seems like such a small nod of acknowledgement; yet they are powerful enough to turn around any negative perspective or humdrum attitude that exists.

There is a human need to be recognized and identified as an individual. Remember that your staff are human first, employees second. If you really don't have a clue about what motivates them or who they are, right now is a great time to find out. What you will learn is, surprise, they are not all cut from the same mold. Each has their own unique characteristics with a variety of motivational drivers. And if you really want to stimulate their get-up-and-go, knowing and tapping into those drivers should be your goal.

That's it! Assure them that the survey is optional (and confidential), and any responses should be given based on their own personal level of comfort. You can use the above bullet examples or make up some of your own. It is an exercise in discovery that will help the practice grow. Knowing that you are willing to make the effort to learn is huge. If you use that knowledge to take action, that will knock their socks off, it becomes an awe-inspiring game changer! PM



Ms. Lynn Homisak, President of SOS Healthcare Management Solutions, carries a Certificate in Human Resource Studies from Cornell University School of Industry and Labor Relations. She is the 2010 recipient of *Podiatry Management's* Lifetime Achievement Award and was inducted into the *PM* Hall of Fame. She is also an Editorial Advisor for *Podiatry Management* magazine and is recognized nationwide as a speaker, writer, and expert in staff and human resource management.