

Employing People Who Have a Good "Work Ethic"

Kiki Herfert brings over 30 years worth of worldwide chiropractic experience to her columns, convention presentations, and management work.

"I frequently have the feeling that I'm either over-staffed or my people just don't seem to accomplish much. It seems to be hard to find anyone with a good "work ethic." How do you teach someone a good work ethic?" -- Frustrated D.C.

I'm assuming "work ethic" means a willingness to work and do the job well. If an employee doesn't understand that they actually have to work for their paycheck, and have a certain level of mastery of the job, you can't make them understand. Look at it as a "factory installed" attitude, not an "add on." You have a right to expect that, after being successfully trained in any particular area of their job, they will complete the work completely and correctly. I hope their "work ethic" also includes looking for something useful to do (staying busy) if their job description work is completed.

Frequent complaints are: "I can't find anybody good"; "They don't have the skills I need"; and "They just don't care about anything." Maybe they truly don't know how to prioritize their work, complete a task, or ask for help when needed. They may be able to learn these things, but I doubt that you can wait long enough for it to benefit you. Somehow these things didn't come "factory installed." A benevolent firing early in training gives you a chance to find a better candidate and is easier on the person than asking them to be/do something they don't have in them.

After hiring we have to pay attention to behavior and attitude. Behaviors are much easier to see than attitudes. For instance, if the person is afflicted with disco dressing, consistently distracts other staff members, puts their feet on furniture, or uses inappropriate language, you may be able to cure it by pointing it out and requesting specific improvements. It's easy to see (or hear) if the person has made changes. It gets a whole lot trickier when it's an overall way of being, a reflection of the way they were raised or the schools and neighborhoods they lived in. Some behaviors are really tough to change, even when the person really wants to.

"Work ethic" reflects attitudes such as "the world owes me," "I don't get paid for that" or "that's not my job." Those attitudes are difficult if not impossible for you to change because the person rarely sees it as a problem. It's how they look at life and the world. It's much easier to start with a person who had the attitudes you want and need as standard equipment. A serious side effect of these attitudes is that they can be contagious. I've seen basically good offices so soured by bad attitudes that more than one person eventually had to go.

The "work ethic"/life attitudes problem is compounded by poor training. Even a person with a good attitude and good work skills is handicapped by lack of training. Many offices lack even a basic job description for each position. There is no clear description of the major components of each area of the job and how to do them. "Sink or swim" training may work for some people but many good people leave in frustration, especially if they are expected to "figure things out themselves" and then

criticized for not doing it "right"!

There's a term I love, called magical thinking. "Mazie has good skills, and I hate training staff, so if I just hope for the best, maybe she'll stop being late, 'bad mouthing me' to the patients, messing up the accounts, dating the patients, and forgetting to give me my messages. I've worked with her for almost two months now. She'll change real soon." Right. It's my feeling that our unwillingness and/or inability to let someone go as soon as it's apparent that the person just can't or won't handle the job just allows "poor work ethic" to continue to exist and actually rewards it.

There are good people out there who will do a good job for you. You have to find them. You have to train them. If you pay them at a level equal to their skills and the "competition" and thank them occasionally for a job well done, they will stay with you and help your practice flourish! Pull up your socks and find yourself some new staff!

P.S. There is always the possibility that you are overstaffed. That is another column!

Dear Readers,

I invite you to call or write me with suggestions for this column. Contact me at:

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