

How to Attract (and Retain) Great Office Staff

Part of growing your plastic surgery practice means making sure every patient has a positive experience. It's important to keep in mind that patients begin forming impressions of you and your practice before you even meet them for the first time. Their first interactions will be with your staff, and you want them to feel welcomed into a relaxed, professional environment. But relaxed, professional environments don't simply happen by themselves; it's up to you to set the tone and parameters that will create your patients' very first impressions of your practice, and there are a number of ways you can ensure that your staff project a welcoming, professional image.

A pleasant work environment helps to foster a sense of community and friendly professionalism. Relaxing colors, soft furnishings, natural light, clean, comfortable, well-supplied restrooms, and designated break areas that are separate from work spaces (no one likes taking a "break" at a desk). While all work areas should be kept neat and professional, you can encourage your staff to personalize their work spaces with decorative touches such as family photos, small plants, sculptures or knickknacks.

Offering small, non-messy snacks (such as wrapped candy or biscuits) in work and waiting areas is another welcoming touch your staff and patients will appreciate. You might sometimes bring a special treat yourself, such as pastry to be shared among the staff; also consider having each staff member take weekly turns bringing inexpensive treats on a volunteer basis. Holidays and special occasions like birthdays can be celebrated with exchanges of small, appropriate gifts such as food, hand lotion or fancy soap. Limit these to a few times per year — it's important to be sensitive to the financial limits of each employee. No matter how fairly you pay them, you have no way of knowing what expenses they may have.

Incentives are different from treats, because they are directly tied to performance. Once every month or quarter, you can hold an (optional) contest to see who can answer the most phone calls, or assign different tasks to "teams" of staff members. Winners might receive a small prize, or a certificate or recognition. These activities should foster a sense of camaraderie and friendly competition, rather than one of negativity or pressure. Contest and competitions should be held in moderation, and always be optional; no one likes forced fun.

Let your staff know you value them by investing in their continued training and support. Arrange to have the entire staff participate in educational workshops or professional seminars once or twice per year. Always compensate them fairly for their participation, perhaps by paying them a stipend, providing a half day off with pay, or encouraging them to collect certifications that can lead to a raise or promotion. Listening to your staff is another crucial element of valuing them. You can solicit their opinions (anonymously or otherwise) about working conditions, the practice, patient care and safety, etc. — even recognizing and honoring the best suggestions that measurably benefit your practice.

Of course, even the happiest, most productive work environment will occasionally have some conflict. How you handle this conflict is as important as you how foster positivity. Strive to handle all conflict and discipline fairly; if you need to, consult with neutral parties about how to address each situation. Having a staff guidebook that clearly outlines all policies and expectations is a good way to avoid many problems before they arise, such as confusion about who reports to whom. It's also your responsibility to be aware of toxic influences among your staff — gossip, dislike, etc. — and to address these as needed. This may include disciplining an employee who continually disrupts staff productivity, or even turning away

prospective patients who treat your staff rudely. Remember: they're your team, and you need them as much as — maybe even more than — they need you. Let them know you appreciate them.