

HOW TO ENGAGE YOUR PRACTICE STAFF



Happy employees create happy patients.

BY LAURA LIVESEY AND ROD SOLAR

Providing patients with a friendly team, pleasant environmental aesthetics, and amenities doesn't guarantee great reviews and referrals from patients. You must engage your employees so that they are emotionally equipped to wow today's demanding patient-consumers and thereby generate positive reviews and word-of-mouth referrals for your practice.

PUT ON THE RITZ

A *net promoter score* is a market research metric that is typically used as an indicator of customer loyalty.¹ The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company set the gold standard in customer service. It consistently achieves one of the highest-known net promoter scores in the hotel industry.²

The Ritz-Carlton credo follows four basic steps of service:

- ▶ **No. 1:** A warm and sincere greeting;
- ▶ **No. 2:** Use of the guest's name;
- ▶ **No. 3:** Anticipation and fulfillment of each guest's needs; and
- ▶ **No. 4:** A fond farewell.

Baked into this seemingly simple formula are employee behaviors driven by an authenticity seen rarely in the clinics that we visit as mystery shoppers.

Borrowing practices from great companies outside of your industry can help your practice deliver game-changing results.

HEALTH CARE EMPLOYEES ARE NOT ENGAGED AT WORK

One of the reasons that we rarely see clinics with customer service standards on par with those of the Ritz-Carlton is that most of the

employees of health care clinics are neither happy nor engaged at work.³ It's been widely reported that health care professionals are feeling overworked, underappreciated, and exhausted.⁴ If one or more employees in your practice are experiencing any of these feelings, it could negatively affect the way they interact with patients, potentially leading to decreased satisfaction with your practice's services.

In 2017, Jim Clifton, the chairman and CEO of Gallup, outlined several alarming statistics about what he termed the world's *broken workplace*.⁵ Gallup is a world leader in measuring employee engagement. Mr. Clifton noted that only 15% of employees worldwide are engaged at work. Some countries had averages higher than 15%. The United States, for example, had 36% employee engagement through 2020. Others, however, ranked worse. According to the 2017 report, the United Kingdom had 8% engagement.⁵ Gallup estimated that the lack of employee engagement at work costs the global economy US\$7 trillion in lost productivity each year.⁶ Add a global pandemic to the mix, and those employee engagement figures have gotten worse.

Employee engagement is becoming one of the most important factors in attracting and retaining talent, and it has a direct link to business performance. Gallup's researchers reported that "engaged employees act differently, going above and beyond to surpass expectations, and that gives their organizations a competitive advantage."⁵

When your employees are engaged, they care about your practice, their

team, and their patients, which can affect aspects of the practice beyond customer service. In a study of 200 hospitals, Gallup reported that nurse engagement levels were the largest variable correlating to patient mortality⁷, and an engagement study by England's National Health Service showed a strong correlation between high employee engagement and reduced staff turnover and absenteeism.⁸

TOP THREE DRIVERS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Employee engagement has little to do with staff appreciation nights or parties and everything to do with how managers help employees grow, feel appreciated, and trust that the organization has a great future.

Based on an analysis of more than 2.7 million employees across 100,000 teams in 54 industries,⁹ the top three drivers of employee engagement are as follows:

- ▶ **No. 1:** Growth, or a feeling that one is advancing and learning new things;
- ▶ **No. 2:** Recognition, or feeling appreciated; and
- ▶ **No. 3:** Trust, or a feeling that the organization has a bright future.

Incorporating the following three tactics can help you to start increasing employee engagement and improving your practice's performance.

Promote soft skills training.

Ophthalmology is a fast-moving discipline, and you likely need your team to keep pace with their technical skills. Many aspects of patient care can nevertheless be routine, which can bore employees and result in disengagement. Working with your team to develop their social

TEACHING EMPLOYEES THE SOFT SKILLS

Learning soft skills can help employees become better workers and more effective humans. This education can help your staff have more stable and productive relationships at home and at the office. To help your employees hone their soft skills, create an annual training plan for your team that includes teaching them how to do the following:

- ▶ Adapt to different personality types
- ▶ Manage patients from different backgrounds, of different ages, and with different lifestyles
- ▶ Listen and demonstrate emotional support
- ▶ Communicate and negotiate
- ▶ Apply interview skills when answering calls from prospective patients
- ▶ Use listening skills to understand their caller's motivations
- ▶ Identify callers' motivations
- ▶ Support patients when they're anxious
- ▶ Respond to patients' questions and their desire to be understood

and emotional skills can contribute to the willingness of your employees to maintain engagement. Employees in a health care setting use social and emotional skills at every stage of the patient journey, and these soft skills are as important as technical ones (for more on this topic, see *Teaching Employees the Soft Skills*).

Show appreciation for your staff. Great managers know that there is no such thing as too much recognition if it's honest and deserved. According to Gallup's analysis, only one in three US workers strongly agreed that they had received recognition or praise for doing good work in the past 7 days.³ A high staff turnover rate is a problem at many practices. Employees who do not feel adequately recognized are twice as likely to report that they will quit in the next year.³

There are hundreds of ways you can recognize your team members. The key is to do it frequently—at least every 7 days. Consider using these five methods of recognition and take note that money isn't the only (or the top) form:

- ▶ **No. 1:** Public recognition or acknowledgment via an award, certificate, or commendation;
- ▶ **No. 2:** Private recognition from a boss, peer, or patient (this one is easy and critical to do weekly);

- ▶ **No. 3:** Obtaining or receiving a high level of achievement through evaluations or reviews;
- ▶ **No. 4:** Promotion or increase in the scope of work or responsibility to show trust; and
- ▶ **No. 5:** Unexpected monetary award such as a trip, prize, or pay increase.

Build trust with quarterly rocks. In

our experience, an almost universal truth in ophthalmology practices is that practice leaders struggle with their staff. One of the best systems we've used to help solve these issues is the entrepreneurial operating system (EOS).¹⁰ EOS is not a computer operating system but rather a people operating system that harnesses human energy through a simple set of tools and principles. Health care leaders can get caught in emotional gridlock, and the practical tools of EOS can help leadership teams become more cohesive, functional, and healthy so that they can create a vision and help employees to execute that vision instead of spinning their wheels.

Your vision represents where you're going and how you plan to get there. Consistently sharing your vision with your staff is an important part of building and maintaining their trust in your practice. Consider your long-term goals and decide on three to seven things that must be

achieved in the next 90 days to move the practice closer to achieving those goals. We call these things your *rocks*. If you hold a meeting every quarter to share progress on the previous quarter's rocks and the rocks for the next quarter, your team is more likely to become invested in the future you are all building together.

IGNORE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AT YOUR OWN RISK

Employee engagement is integral to achieving your practice's most important goals. Start engaging your team with social-emotional skills training, weekly recognition, and quarterly rocks to begin reaping the benefits in your practice. ■

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