

Beyond the Bench

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August Topic: Securing Your Biggest Investment—Your Employees

In recent years, the talk about town has been a shortage of laboratory technicians and, as you can imagine, there's lots of competition out there. I've even heard literal "war" stories of laboratories trying to actively recruit and solicit experienced technicians away from their current employers to come and join their teams.

It makes you take stock of what you're doing to protect your biggest investment: your employees. Are you keeping pace with benefits offered in the industry, like health insurance, a 401K plan with matching contributions, or paid vacation days? Is your pay scale commensurate with experience and industry standards?

But there are other factors that contribute to employee satisfaction and whether or not you've got a team that's staying together for the long haul. Because, when you think about it, every time one of your technicians leaves, it's a financial and productivity nightmare in the making. You've now got to incur the expenses of advertising for and interviewing a new recruit, not to mention training them. Depending on the amount of notice given, you've now got to make up for that technician's lost production. And you can imagine the rest. So, consider the following and just how it can affect the satisfaction of your technical staff.

Share the Success, Not Just the Wealth

Sure, everybody likes a little more money in their pocket when they're least expecting it. We know it as a bonus. And why do we give bonuses? Because we've done well; because we've succeeded.

At our lab, every year—or even sometimes monthly—I'll look at what our sales were and what our profits are and distribute substantial bonuses based on how people participated in that success. Sometimes it's based on performance, sometimes on participation in the success of the team, and sometimes just overall attitude toward their job all year long.

What do I mean by attitude? Well, to me, it's reflected by—for example—someone who is willing to grab the plaster trap, if it's broken, and empty it. Now, anyone who's done this knows that it's not the type of thing you'll volunteer to do on a daily

basis. But to me, the person who does this is showing that they care and that they're a team player. That "attitude" needs to be respected and recognized.

Or, let's say a doctor calls and says they've got a case for which they need a wax-up, but I'm not available and some of the other techs are swamped, but someone else says, "Hey, doc, don't worry, I'll come in on Saturday and do it for you." That's important to me, and to the laboratory, and it deserves to be recognized. The technician who stepped up, above and beyond deserves to know that his or her efforts and attitude are appreciated, and that it has contributed to our success.

Set Realistic Expectations

Consider what happens when technicians are overloaded. At our laboratory, we know that technicians could probably produce 20 units a day, but do so poorly. Well, nobody wants to do a bad job. To me, I don't think it's fair to expect more than 8 units a day from one person in order to ensure the quality of the products we're producing. So, that's what we schedule per day for the technician, and it allows them plenty of time to do the case, fine-tune it, and exercise their creativity. How do I know this leads to employee satisfaction? Well, here's a story.

A technician I hired about 6 years ago came to me with some bridges, which were amazingly beautiful. He told me that was the kind of work he did, and he wanted a job. I questioned it. After all: why would this guy show up with that kind of esthetic work, unsolicited, and expect to get hired? Obviously he was passing off someone else's work!

I asked him to come in on a Saturday and do 8 units for me, and I explained that if he could produce even half the quality of the work he was showing me that day, I would pay him for the day so he wouldn't be wasting his time. Sure enough, he was awesome. So I asked him, "Why would any laboratory let you leave?" He responded that he wasn't satisfied where he was currently working because, although they paid him a very fair wage, he had to produce 20 units a day and wasn't able to produce the quality—or the artistry—that he wanted to. He said if I would pay him what he was currently making, and allow him to make 8 units a day—which he had heard was my policy, he would come to work for me. And he did, and he's still here today!

It's worth repeating that every technician wants to feel that they're doing a great job. I don't think anyone wants to settle for doing poor or even mediocre work. At our

lab, we've created an atmosphere where they don't have to knock out a million units to make their pay.

Recognize Work is a Part of a Whole Life

Like most business, a laboratory requires employees, including technicians, to “punch in and out.” At our laboratory, we say we work from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., but realistically, we have flexible work schedules. For example, one of my technicians needs to drop his child off at school at 8:30 a.m. Now, am I going to tell someone who produces \$300,000 in laboratory work for me to “Get Lost” because his familial obligations don't allow him to get to work until 9 a.m.? Of course not! As long as the work expectations—meaning what is expected of that employee according to the schedule—are completed and ready to be shipped when assigned, then flexible schedules accommodate everyone's needs. It's really simple: come to work, do your job well, and complete and ship your assigned restorations on time.

Conclusion

At a time when laboratory technicians really have the upper hand, it's important to find interesting ways to enhance their satisfaction with the work environment as a whole. Sure, adequate compensation, a clean and ergonomic work station, and traditional benefits that help maintain their financial well-being are important. But the humanistic factors—perhaps along the lines of Maslow's hierarchy of needs—like personal and professional satisfaction, recognition for a job well done and the ability to actually do a job well, are also important to keep your most valuable assets: your technicians!