

# A Healthy Work Environment = Happy Employees & Patients

You and your office staff work hard to provide your patients with the best service and care, but are you doing enough to nurture a healthy work environment in your office?

For Marnell Moore, DPM, FACFAS, owner of Happy Feet Podiatry LLC in East Orange and West Orange, New Jersey, and Kyle Vaughn, DPM, AACFAS, owner of Paradise Valley Foot & Ankle in Phoenix, a healthy work environment starts with mutual respect. This means doctors and staff treat each other as peers, and patients are considered clients whose needs always come first. A respectful workplace also makes patients feel welcome and comfortable. “Patients can easily detect tensions among staff and doctors in the office, especially when a doctor talks down to or berates a staff member,” notes Dr. Moore. “A simple and sincere ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ can go a long way in keeping the office atmosphere pleasant and inviting for patients.”

But even the healthiest workplaces can fall victim to negativity. Poor communication, employee dissatisfaction with workloads, schedules or pay and high turnover can lower morale and in effect create a toxic work environment. To combat this, Dr. Vaughn recommends instilling rigid and well-communicated office policies right from the start. “This will often help eliminate negative factors long before they become an issue,” he says.

Dr. Moore suggests examining which issues have the greatest return on investment to improve employee satisfaction and to address those first. One way to do this is to offer all staff equal opportunity to participate in professional and personal development. Dr. Vaughn points out that if you send your biller or office manager to a coding or practice management workshop, you should also give your x-ray technician the chance to acquire further advanced skills or CME credit.



Marnell Moore  
DPM, FACFAS



Kyle Vaughn  
DPM, AACFAS

Sometimes, however, even the best intentions to improve a practice’s work environment can cause more harm than good. For example, leadership should not guess at what problems need to be addressed—they should speak with employees directly. “Interview employees to find out what is bothering them and what they feel would help improve their personal satisfaction at work,” says Dr. Moore. She indicates this approach allows for goals and measurable outcomes to be determined before any changes are made in the practice.

Another common mistake, according to Dr. Vaughn, is when doctors or administrators treat their staff too much like friends instead of employees. “You can be respectful and kind while still maintaining a distinct boundary between staff and leadership,” he says.

New healthcare policies and legislation can also cause stress and tension within a medical practice as doctors and staff try to

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keep up with new or changing standards. To prepare for and manage such changes while keeping the work environment balanced and productive, communication between doctors and staff is key. In her practice, Dr. Moore takes time to explain why office policies and processes are changing and which corresponding regulations prompted the changes. “Getting buy-in from everyone in the office helps implementation go more smoothly,” she says.

Dr. Vaughn highlights the importance of communicating to staff how their roles may evolve as policies and mandates change. He also advises leadership to evenly distribute new tasks and responsibilities as they arise to reduce any “that’s not my job” responses from employees.

Both Drs. Moore and Vaughn agree that doctors and staff who are new to a medical practice can do much early on to contribute to the work environment in a positive way. Dr. Vaughn appreciates how a new doctor or staff member can look at a practice with a fresh pair of eyes and recognize any longstanding deficiencies s/he can help address. Dr. Moore makes sure to harness a new employee’s enthusiasm during training so s/he is folded into the current structure, feels welcome and learns how to follow the practice’s rules and procedures. “This is an easier prospect,” Dr. Moore notes, “when current employees also follow those office policies, and everyone feels valued and appreciated for their contributions.”

To encourage buy-in among doctors and staff when it comes to creating a healthy

work environment, Drs. Moore and Vaughn recommend the following:

- Explain that no one can thrive in healthcare alone—it is a team effort.
- Reward behavior that promotes mutual respect and professionalism.
- Provide frequent feedback and consistent performance evaluations that stress respectful and professional behavior.
- Do not tolerate any behavior that berates or demeans other employees.

“Employees should understand that how they treat their coworkers and patients is not only a reflection of themselves, but a reflection of the practice,” Dr. Moore closes. “Establish this as a core value, and your practice will always enjoy a healthy work environment.”

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