

# The key to real office teamwork

**W**hen asked what type of practice he was in, a doctor seated next to me at a medical convention replied "you would probably call mine a solo family practice, but I have three partners," he replied with a half smile. "You see, I have never been eager to take on the complications of joining other physicians in a partnership or group, but our practice is a fairly large one and I could never manage it alone."

He explained: "My partners are my nurse who has been with me since I opened my practice 12 years ago; my secretary bookkeeper who has been with us about eight years and our receptionist who started last year. We consider her a junior partner now but she is working her way up."

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**If you treat your office assistants like partners, not just employees, this personnel expert says, you will find that 'your' practice will become 'our practice'.**

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"When I refer to my office assistants as partners, I am simply expressing a philosophy and attitude about the way we work together in this office. I have seen too many physicians who regard themselves as lords of the manor being served by overpaid and underworked vassals. Instead I have taught myself to think of my employees as co-workers and partners in the running of our office.

When asked to elaborate on his personnel management methods, this is what he told me:

## 1 Say 'we' instead of 'I'      2 Share the credit

Avoid references to 'my' practice when talking to office assistants. Once you get yourself thinking of your employees as co-workers, you will find it natural to say 'our' practice.

Be as conscientious about sharing the credit for professional successes as you are about pointing out mistakes. For example, you might have occasion to say to your nurse: "Mrs White has shown a lot of improvement since I

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talked over her marital problems with her. I am glad you noticed and commented on her depression when she was here the other day. I could have missed it altogether, rushed as we were that day."

### 3 Listen to your 'partners'

Set aside some time, at regular intervals for meetings with your office staff. Encourage free discussion of problems. Ask for advice and use as much of it as you reasonably can. Try to do more listening than talking at these meetings.

### 4 Respect lines of authority

If you have delegated authority in a given area to an assistant, consider yourself subject to that authority along with the rest of your staff. For instance, if your receptionist has been assigned to make all appointments with patients and a request comes directly to you, reroute it back to her. When she already has you booked solid and you make further commitments, chaos results. Should that happen, just remember who is at fault.

### 5 Be as good as your word

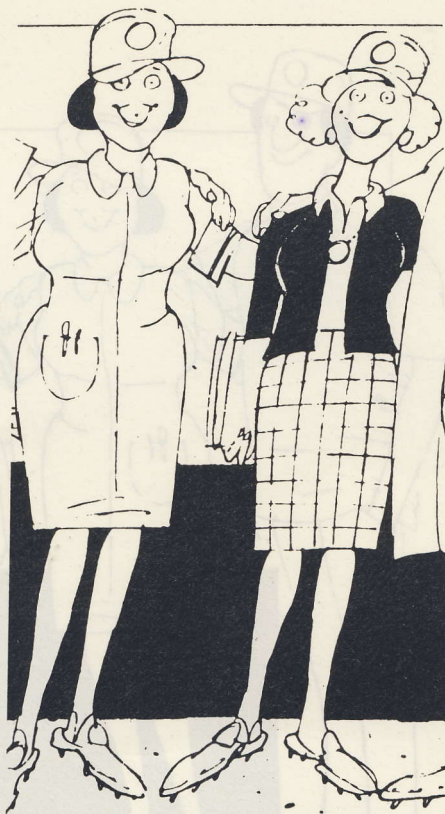
If you are not prepared to keep a promise to your staff, do not make it. If you say "We will have a pension plan by this time next year," be sure it happens. When unavoidable circumstances interfere, make a point of explaining them. Nothing is more vital to staff than confidence in the boss's word.

### 6 Place blame where it belongs

When something goes wrong in the office do a little investigating before trying to pin the responsibility on any one. Collections down? Maybe you have been telling your patients not to worry about their bills instead of referring payment problems to your bookkeeper. Insurance payments delayed? Could it be because incomplete charts are piled up on your desk and the claims cannot be filed? Appointment schedule in a mess? Consider whether it is because of your late arrival and

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those phone calls to your stockbroker? When you yourself are the cause of a problem, you can be very sure your employees know it. Consequently, they will resent it if you try to switch the blame to them.

### 7 Cultivate enthusiasm

Do not expect deep devotion to patient care from a new employee until she has had time to develop pride in the importance of her contribution. Your own attitude and example will either nurture or kill the finest attitude she can have.

### 8 Obey your own rules

If you forbid smoking and eating in patient care areas, for example, that rule should apply to you as well as to others. Anything an employee does that offends patients is equally offensive — maybe more so — if the doctor does it.

### 9 Play the numbers

Even in a small office, employees can be stimulated to compete with their own past performance. One statistical game you might introduce them to is 'boost the collection ratio'. In any office collection, percentages should be calculated monthly as well as annually. The effect of a new collection technique can be gauged by comparing a period in which it was used with a period when it was not. You can easily work out similar numbers games that are based on daily receipts, overhead expenses, and patients seen monthly or weekly.

### 10 Reward good performance

If your office assistants are making a major contribution to you and the patients you all serve, you should recognize this with both words and actions. Promote from within the office whenever you can. Encourage your employees to take appropriate continuing education courses and otherwise upgrade their skills. Cherish and reward longevity and loyalty. These are some of the most effective steps a doctor can take to ensure his own prosperity and joy in his practice. □