



Creating a Better Workplace

by Ruth Linné Lander, F.A.C.M.P.E.

As administrator of an eight-person physician practice in Columbus, Ohio, I have the wonderful responsibility to create a work environment in which staff looks forward to coming in on a Monday morning. I have worked long and hard to become a better listener and to empower staff to grow and make more strategic contributions.

Great benefits are reaped when we empower our employees. Empowerment means a more fundamental change than mere delegation. It entails a willingness to let go, to change old habits, and to help anxious employees to abandon their fears.

Many employees are already more than able to take all the responsibility you can give them. You can help staff realize how much power they already have through their specialist skills and knowledge.

I am reminded of a quote by Jeff Dewar in his book *Empowering, Involving, and Enabling the Organization*. He says: "The dramatic movement toward empowerment is not based in a 'kindhearted' desire to make employees 'feel' better. Rather, the decision to empower a team is rooted in the need to rapidly increase productivity, reduce costs, and improve performance. Empowerment is a hard-nosed business decision to harness an enormous pool of energy, creativity, and motivation that in most organizations goes wasted and unutilized."

In our practice we strive to empower employees to set their own goals and to work toward those goals in their own fashion.

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"We are encouraged to interact with each other," says Jennie Mann, a review specialist from our billing staff, "for example, to make suggestions, change procedures that will improve the functions of the department and even other departments that affect ours. We are empowered to go beyond the scope of our immediate responsibilities."

Trust and mutual respect are the foundation of a healthy workplace. Building respect of all staff toward each other starts with you. Show respect with a pleasant and up-to-date working environment and a sincere greeting. Let staff participate in decisions. Respect comes from letting staff act without your approval in appropriate areas and then allowing each employee to have a less than perfect result without fear of reprisal from you. By setting realistic expectations about your staff and fairly applying rules, employees will dare to try new ideas and probably end up being much more valuable team players in the long run.

Besides trust and mutual respect, a healthy workplace must have good listeners. Would staff say you listen to them? Sometimes employees are simply "run over" because we are all so busy doing such important work. Take time to listen as well as observe. By doing so you may discover not-so-obvious obstacles that staff face in doing their job efficiently. Discussing and correcting these time thieves can increase morale, operations, and hopefully the bottom line.

Openness and honesty are crucial. Have you ever felt disconnected from your company or out of the information loop? If so, you know how it feels to be isolated. Keep staff as informed as possible about company plans or status. Doing so will keep everyone connected.

Providing feedback about job performance is an important part of honesty and good staff communication. Employees must know if they are meeting company goals, and if not, why not and what they need to do to improve. Providing regular feedback to managers and to the empowered employee will build their confidence.

Do you provide encouragement for a job well done? Freely praising a good job goes a long way. Providing genuine recognition can inspire and motivate, as well as help you retain employees.

Never stifle personal growth. Give your employees the training and development tools they need to succeed in their current job and to grow into new areas if they so choose. If they don't grow with you, they will go somewhere else. Status quo should not be the goal in today's competitive employment environment.

Leading your practice or your department to greater heights requires the will to serve. "Remember that leadership is earned by the leader and bestowed by followers, based on the capacity and intent of the leader to serve, first and foremost," wrote Kenneth L. Murrell & Mimi Meredith in *Empowering Employees*. "Being a servant-leader means that you offer resources when workers need them to do their jobs, when customers need them to be satisfied, and when innovation requires new supplies; that you'll find ways to help get the job done; that you'll ask for input; and that you'll anticipate needs."

As we begin 2001, my New Year's Resolution is to create an even better working environment for myself, my staff, and our patients. Good luck in 2001 as you undertake improvements in your own organization. ☐