

Coping with "Difficult" Coworkers

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"The staff are not getting along" is a cry for help I frequently hear from physicians and practice executives. Staff relationships can be one of the most time consuming and mentally draining aspects of a manager's or supervisor's day. Staff who find it difficult to work with one another not only influence the culture of the practice, but their failure to communicate effectively can lead to errors and adverse patient outcomes. When I am called into a practice and probe deeper into the issues, the comments from both sides are usually the same. They usually go something like this...

- "She is difficult to work with."
- "He doesn't listen to me."
- "She is difficult to talk to."
- "He doesn't like me."

Each side finds the other equally "difficult." The reality is the "difficult" is often just "different."

Very few employees set out to alienate their coworkers and be purposely difficult. Those individuals have an entirely different set of issues. Most people want to do a good job. The problem is that we all approach situations differently. Some of us are task focused; meaning that getting the job done is the most important thing. They work methodically from a checklist until it is complete. There is no chitchat until the work is done. Others are people focused; meaning relationships, people and feelings come first. For those individuals, making the patient feel welcome and cared for is more important than collecting the details needed for accurate billing and documentation. They view those things as tasks that can be completed after the emotional needs are met.

Clearly, both sides of the equation are important. Without efficient and timely billing processes and positive patient experiences, a practice cannot be successful in today's environment. It is easy to see how conflict ensues when each side views the others' priorities as misplaced. Add into the equation how we each communicate. Some are strongly introverted and private. They need peace and quiet to work effectively. Others are extroverts who thrive on giving and getting attention amidst all the chaos that occurs in a busy medical practice. They need the excitement to keep them going. The key to effective relationships is understanding how you work and communicate while respecting that others may have different styles and needs.

A practice experiencing these issues called me recently. After speaking with the practice executive, I was able to recommend a presentation that focused on these different styles. With a simple personality assessment, the staff quickly realized where the issues were. They were simply different, not difficult. Talking about the positives and challenges of each style, everyone quickly realized some of the stereotypes fit. Acknowledging that it takes a variety of personalities, skills and styles to run an office effectively, the mood lightened as they viewed each other in a new light. A sense of appreciation for one another's skills emerged. Once they understood the need to adapt their communication based on the listener, it not only improved their communication skills with one another, but also with their patients. Empathy and collaboration replaced the suspicion and discord, which had previously prevented them from becoming the most effective team needed to thrive in today's evolving healthcare environment.

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