

Designing Your Personnel Policies for the '90s

By Sherri L. Henderson



In this fast-paced world, pediatric practices are experiencing a variety of concerns with the multitude of health care changes. We are not only con-

cerned with standards of quality for our patients, but the legal issues of staffing seem to be overwhelming. Plan to protect your practice from future problems. Foster communications in a teamwork environment. Interactions among employers and employees can be delicate unless expectations are clearly defined by both parties.

This article will explore the decision-making and implementation of personnel standards and policies designed to prevent needless misunderstandings. We will address basic procedures and requirements: purpose of policies, employee relations, compensation, attendance, benefits, standards of conduct and record keeping under fair labor standards.

Getting started: Finding the proper words and expressing oneself often hinders a dentist or administrator from clearly writing the manual. It is essential, regardless the size of the practice, to understand the needs of employees in order to develop practice policy. Outdated policy manuals can cause confusion and subject the owner to liability. All policies must be open to changing conditions and legal requirements.

Decision-making and implementation: It is generally agreed that announced personnel policies are binding, both to the practice and employee. Employees need to understand their roles in helping to formulate these policies, which are essential to good communication and relationships. Federal and state laws govern employer-employee relationships. These statutes should be reviewed before any manual is

distributed to employees. Designing the manual requires certain basic steps: (1) State the practice's basic employee relation philosophies. (2) Set forth ethical, strategic and organizational parameters with which management interacts with employees. (3) Provide a sound framework for consistent management decisions. (4) Protect the practice against legal challenges to fair employment practices.

All policies should be reviewed annually for updating. The updated policy should be presented and verified that all employees have read and understand any changes.

Making a positive effort to be fair to all employees in all situations will promote trust and staff assurance.

Employee orientation: Employers often fail to communicate some of these basic attributes of a personnel policy:

- ✓ Appreciation. People must know that they are appreciated in their work.
- ✓ Fairness. Employees need to know that the policies set forth will be positive and fair.
- ✓ Job fulfillment. This is an ultimate need for employees to feel secure in their positions through a career choice that will be a happy one.
- ✓ Compensation. The staff expects a fair rate of pay. The employer needs to understand and recognize that low wages lead to discontent, excessive turnover, and high frustration level.

Introduction and philosophy: A formal introduction into the practice sets the standard for good communications among TEAM members.

Purpose of policies

Irreparable misunderstandings in communication and turnover in employment can be avoided with written policies, which are distributed to be understood by all those concerned. The purposes of written policies are: (1) A clear explanation of existing policies and procedures. (2) To improve rapport between management and employ-

ees. (3) As a framework for decision-making. (4) To document fair and equal opportunities to current and future employees. (5) To assist in employee productivity. (6) To interpret existing and past policies. (7) As a quick and easy reference for formulating new policies.

Employee relations

A clear definition of employee status is necessary for categorizing related benefit issues for the following positions: part-time employees who work less than a certain number of hours each week; temporary employees; trial employees who reach full-time status; and full-time employees who work no less than a certain number of hours each week.

These categories are especially important in a pediatric practice where the offices experience busy seasons and employees work extra time to accommodate the patient load.

Categories of employee relations: These items need to be addressed in all manuals: telephone calls, office conversations/confidentiality, grooming and uniforms, personal affairs, accuracy and job clarification, medical and dental appointments, coffee breaks and use of lounge, continuing education, handling of practice funds, grievances, housekeeping, office decor, professional-administrative supplies, staff meetings, injuries, outside employment, doctor visits outside of office, parking and security.

Compensation: Make sure your office complies with federal or state wage and hour laws. These laws protect the employee in the areas of: compensation and pay periods, overtime, final paychecks, and worker's compensation.

Attendance: Many problems may be avoided by clear definitions for: office hours, inclement weather, holidays, disability, vacation days, absences, sick leave, personal days, and leave of absence.

Miscellaneous benefits: Employees should be provided with specific interpretation of these benefits: health, life and disability insurances; pension and profit sharing plans; and professional courtesy for employees and families.

Standards of conduct

Among the most common reasons for an employer to dismiss an employee are

violations that are intolerable and should result in disciplinary action. At times it may include immediate termination of employment. For any of these violations, the employer, at his or her discretion, can discharge an employee at any time with or without advanced notice: violation of confidential information; embezzlement of practice funds, equipment or supplies; forgery of documents; illegal use of controlled substances; abusive treatment of patients; and conviction of a felony.

Miscellaneous conduct: There are state and local policies that protect the employer and employee in the following: handgun regulations, drug-free workplace policy, OSHA compliances, sexual harassment, and drug and alcohol testing policy.

Record keeping: Proper record keeping and documentation of employee files is mandatory in compliance with the federal and state Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Under these regulations, the employer is required to keep the following: individual employee's application; notes showing why the applicant was hired/dismissed; vacation and sick-leave records; evaluation forms; wage and salary history; records of promotions, demotions or other personnel action; and Federal I-9 and W-2 forms.

Note: All written communication must be consistent. Should agency or legal action be taken by an employee, the agency or court will adhere to the employer's written word. The employer should not be vague in any interpretation. It is better to leave out words than to misinterpret the law.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, most practices do not cover all these necessary topics until they have experienced a problem. If the doctor feels uncertain about formulating any office policies that might involve legal issues, he or she should have the draft reviewed by an attorney.

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