

Attacking the De-motivators: Five Behaviors to Avoid in Managing Urgent Care Staff

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A constant struggle of urgent care entrepreneurs is getting front line staff to share their passion for building a successful business. All too often, the practice that represents a physician's hopes, dreams and life savings, is viewed as "just a job" by the people who work there. Fact of the matter is that front-line staff typically does not even see itself working for a business, but rather, working for other people. At the end of a typical workday, which do you think your employees are likely to discuss around the dinner table:

- a) the urgent care center's marketing slogan, competitive positioning and EBIDTA margin; or
- b) the words and deeds of their direct supervisor and/or colleagues?

Most likely the answer is b), meaning employee motivation is determined in large part by the ways managers reinforce employees' enthusiasm and commitment to their work.

Last month's article, *Five Activities for Cultivating a Motivated Center Team*, illustrated that employee motivation comes from within, but a manager's actions can certainly amplify or squelch an employee's innate drive. When dealing with staff in your urgent care center, consider the following behaviors that can be de-motivating to employees and ask yourself, "am I the kind of manager I would be motivated to work for?"

1) Speaking without thinking first.

A manager should be cognizant of how employees will interpret every communication before that communication occurs. This means asking yourself: "what outcome do I intend to achieve," "how best should I communicate to achieve that outcome," and "what are some possible other outcomes that could occur?" If unsure of these answers, it may be better to hold back communication than to "shoot from the hip."

Words are interpreted in their context, so not only is it critical to choose your words carefully, but also to consider how, when and where messages will be communicated. Actions like sarcastic or condescending tones, correcting errors in front of peers or patients, resurrecting problems long after they've been resolved, and "badmouthing" employees to their peers communicate far more than any words. They provide an example—to an employee, their manager's communication affirms or disaffirms how they're valued, trusted and respected by the workplace.

All workplace communication should be authentic—clear, meaningful, without pretense, and sensitive to others' perceptions. Even when used in jest, put-downs, insults and sexual innuendo can hurt employee's feelings and reveal management's insecurity. Managers who promote negative, cynical or abrasive communication are likely to find such attitudes manifest in interactions among team members and with patients—the result being lost revenue due to disengaged employees and dissatisfied patients. Just as management communication should be confident and optimistic, employees should be encouraged to be positive about one another and to support each other's respective roles.

2) Making excuses.

Avoid being “long on promises and short on fulfillment.” Managers who promise one thing and do something else rarely “own up” to their shortcomings. Rather, they make excuses for their failure to deliver results. These excuses shred a manager’s credibility in the eyes of employees.

Typically “empty promises” are used to placate employees when there’s a situation the manager can’t resolve. For example, in a center where the front office is constantly behind, a manager may curtail attrition of existing staff by promising to hire an additional registration assistant. But if budget constraints mean no funds are available, then the manager is only delaying the inevitable that thinly-stretched employees will leave. When months pass with no change, de-motivated staff may still leave but they’ll now do so with the resentment they had been “lied to.”

The better approach is to be open and realistic with employees—maybe the center will remain short-staffed inevitably until volume rises to support additional payroll expense, but as a team are there ways to balance responsibilities and improve processes to lighten the load? Engaging staff in finding a solution can actually lead to greater motivation as “ownership” of the problem transfers from the manager to the team.

Although it’s impossible for a manager to always do what he intends, when failures do occur, it’s best to be down to earth and straightforward with people. Employees typically respect the honesty and humanity of a manager who is willing to take risks and learn from mistakes. Otherwise, once a manager demonstrates it’s okay to make excuses—all accountability is lost as employees will likewise blame everyone and everything else for their own failure to perform.

3) Not listening to employees.

Front line staff is a manager’s *number one* resource in knowing what’s going on in day-to-day operations but often managers speak over employees, not providing them a chance to “cue in” management to issues that could ultimately “make or break” the center. If management either ignores what employees are telling them—or worse—disregards confidences and uses the information against them—employees begin to exercise their “right to remain silent.” The result is a “it’s not my problem, I just work here” mentality.

Listening speaks louder than words in conveying respect and trust—it says to an employee you care about them and what they have to say. When speaking to employees, be patient, learn where the other person is coming from, and ask probing questions. Often it’s helpful to summarize or paraphrase in your own words what you understand the employee to have communicated—and then follow-up by letting the employee know how you intend to act on the information.

Never argue with an employee who is sharing his/her perspective on the business. Listening does not mean agreement—it’s always possible to “agree to disagree”—but as a manager it’s your role to maintain respect, patience and consideration. Listening to employees and putting their ideas to use is one of the most important things a manager can do to can boost motivation and job satisfaction.

4) Withholding communication.

For employees, work is very “personal”—it represents time away from their family and hobbies and affirms their sense of purpose and esteem. And just as employees want to keep informed on all aspects of their personal lives, they also want to know what’s going on at work. Forget about job titles and pay differences—the cornerstone of

respect is a mutual understanding that employees have a stake in the center's success and keeping them informed demonstrates this respect.

When asked the number one de-motivator, one high-performing employee responded, "seeing less qualified people promoted while taking advantage of all my hard work." This employee is expressing several issues all related to management's openness—not knowing what advancement opportunities are available, not understanding how to position herself for such opportunities, and believing that favoritism and politics are more important to career progression than merit and hard work. Had management posted the new job for all interested individuals to apply, explained the criteria for selection, and coached high potential employees on how to prepare themselves for promotion—the employee would have been far more supportive of the hiring decision and perhaps even more motivated to "try for the position next time." By failing to communicate its actions and intentions, instead management secluded to a "black box" and the employee was left guessing as to how and why the decision was made.

It's important to communicate open and honestly with employees—make announcements, celebrate successes, work on problems together, share praise received from other people, and invite questions and comments from employees. When employees suspect there is important information that's being withheld, they will usually assume (and act on) the worst case scenario they can envision.

5) Hypocrisy and compromise.

Managers should always be true to themselves—leading by example and doing the right thing according to their values. A manager whose actions are inconsistent with his stated values—who behaves inappropriately, cuts ethical corners, rides political fences, and uses others—makes a poor role model.

Whether they like it or not, managers are the "guardians" of an organization's values—and employees learn these values by watching their managers. A manager who succeeds despite being wishy-washy, "looking out for number one," leaning whatever way everyone else leans, and being generally weak—demonstrates to employees that these are, in fact, the leadership qualities that are important to the organization.

To build trust, a manager should never do anything contrary to the organization's stated values, but more importantly—he should also never ask employees to do something he would never do himself. "Walking the talk" means never tolerating mediocrity. Always strive to improve—being humble, admitting to mistakes, and committing to listen and learn. If uncertain where to begin, as a manager you can improve yourself by helping your employees improve themselves and achieve their goals.

Conclusion

Trust is the foundation for all business relationships and a great source of employee motivation. Building trust is dependent on authentic communication, defining high standards of conduct, and living personal values. When managers communicate or behave in ways that arouse suspicion and distrust among employees, the certain result is de-motivation of the staff. Therefore, it's important that managers constantly monitor their actions to assure they are not speaking without thinking first, making excuses instead of delivering results, turning a deaf ear to employee concerns, or acting in hypocritical and compromising ways.