

Ebb and Flow

By Reuven Lirov, M.A.

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Expert commentary by
Dr. Brian Capra and Candace Coleman

Into the Fire

Poor Communication Turns up the Heat in the Office

How do staff problems affect Dr. Ben's chiropractic practice?

"Ben? Can I talk to you about something serious?"

Ben turned to his wife in surprise. Carmen was usually easy-going, taking a relaxed attitude even in serious situations.

"Of course. What's up?"

"It's the girls at the pizzeria." Like many pizza places, Ben knew, Carmen's place had lots of part-time help, including students and musicians who needed a day job. The work tended to be fun and casual, even though Carmen ran a tight ship. She had a lot of turnover -- what restaurant didn't? -- but she rarely

had staffing problems.

"I'm usually the one complaining about my staff," Ben said. "You usually go with the flow."

"I know," Carmen agreed. "I think we're a happy workplace, and the systems are organized enough that the people can relax. But we have this new delivery guy..."

Carmen hesitated.

"Spit it out!" joked Ben.



“Well, okay, he’s really cute. Whenever he’s in the shop, the girls hang out near him, flirting, instead of doing their work.”

Ben couldn’t help laughing. “That’s your employee problem? Listen, I have staff absences, paperwork backing up, information silos that mean we constantly have questions that can’t be answered because the only person who knows the answer is off --”

“You aren’t even listening!” Carmen objected. “I can’t bring this up with the girls without insulting them, and I can’t bring it up with the new guy at all. I can’t fire him for being too cute --”

“Sorry, Carmen,” Ben insisted, “you don’t know what staff problems are if your idea of a staff problem is how to avoid hurting somebody’s feelings. My people are competent, but there doesn’t seem to be enough communication among them to keep the paperwork and billing going smoothly. We end up looking bad to the clients because their files can’t be found, or missing out on billings because the paperwork has errors. Those are staff problems.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Carmen said. “Those do sound like more serious problems. Are you paying enough attention to your workers?”

“That’s part of the problem, I’m sure,” Ben admitted. “I’m in with patients all day. I don’t have time

to oversee the staff, and I guess they all have a lot of freedom to set up their own systems...”

Carmen laughed. “If everyone just does what he or she wants, you can’t call it a system.”

“Well at least I’ve got you laughing,” Ben said. “Listen, just tell your people to get back to work. You’re letting your embarrassment over the situation make it seem more difficult than it is.”

As they got ready for bed, though, Ben was wondering. If that was the biggest staff problem Carmen faced in her business, why was he constantly troubled by staff problems in his?

How do staff problems affect Dr. Ben’s chiropractic practice?

Mistakes

What are the consequences of mistakes in Dr. Ben’s office?

“Honey, I’m home!” Ben sang out as he stepped through the front door. His small son ran and tackled his knees, and he was relieved to see that his wife was smiling.



Ben swung Jonathan up onto his shoulder and hugged Carmen. “How’d things go at work today?” he asked her.

“You were right,” she said. “Once I talked honestly and respectfully with the girls about how much time there were spending on... umm... personal things...”

“By which you mean the super-cute delivery guy,” Ben cut in.

“Exactly,” Carmen laughed. “Anyway, they saw my point and I think it’ll be okay. It’s just hard to get a conversation like that started.”

Ben thought about his own staffing issues. High staff turnover, absenteeism, and errors seemed to be a constant problem, and he didn’t feel that he had time to spare to deal with the issues -- even if he’d had a good plan for approaching them.

Jonathan’s attempts to get back down to the floor got Ben’s attention away from work, and he set the boy gently on the floor. Jonathan scampered off and Carmen said gently, “Are you worrying about work again?”

Ben agreed that he was. “Maybe it’s the upcoming changes in reporting regulations that are making me notice it more,” he said, “but I feel like we make a lot of mistakes.”

“Any mistakes in a medical office feel like a lot,” Carmen observed.

“Oh, it’s not mistakes in treatment. It’s things like incorrect diagnosis codes, forgetting to collect copayments, incomplete documentation, delayed payments -- even overpayments.”

“Not things that affect the patients, then?” Carmen asked.

“Actually, that kind of mistake can affect the patients,” Ben admitted. “Whether it’s a billing issue that gets uncomfortable and the patient just doesn’t come back, or a feeling that things are falling through the cracks that makes a patient feel less confident about us, we can lose patients because of office problems.”

“Plus,” he went on, following his wife into the kitchen as she raced to turn off the oven timer, “Every hour I spend dealing with office SNAFUs is an hour that I’m not seeing patients.”

Carmen cocked her head, a steaming pan of baked sausage and eggplant in her hands. “I think it’s always easier to change the circumstances than to change people,” she said, setting the pan onto the table. She began to gather the ingredients for a salad.

Ben grabbed a tomato and began to slice it. “The circumstances are pretty settled,” he objected. “We have things we have to do, sometimes by law. There aren’t

many points for originality when you’re talking about medical billing.”

“I get that, but there must be things that make it easier to make mistakes, or harder. Like lines in the parking lot make it easier to park a lot of cars than it would be if everyone just did their own thing.”

Jonathan raced in at that moment with a picture he had drawn, and Ben pushed thoughts of work from his mind, but Carmen’s words came back to him later. It seemed like lots of little mistakes added up to big problems. If his staff couldn’t change, how could he get past the problems?

What are the consequences of mistakes in Dr. Ben’s office?

Hanging In

Office unease leaves practice owners dangling



Are the problems in his practice Dr. Ben’s fault?

Ben sighed contentedly and rested his chin on his wife’s head. Their son was sitting on her lap and she leaned against him on the sofa so that he could hug her and their little boy at the same time. They had a cartoon movie on the TV, but Ben wasn’t paying attention to it. At times like these, their family seemed like a perfect unit, and his life seemed as though it was completely under control.

So why didn’t it feel that way at the office more frequently? Carmen had problems at the pizzeria sometimes, but it always seemed as though she could just tackle the problem and solve it, and it was over.

At his practice, it felt like they no sooner solved one problem than another one came up. They had high turnover in the front office, and he knew that was part of the

reason things slipped through the cracks, but maybe the high turnover was a symptom of the problem.

Absenteeism, too -- of course that led to turnover when people had to be let go, but it also seemed as though any time one person was missing it created a bottleneck in the office. Then when absent workers returned, it took three days to recover from every one day they'd been gone.

Maybe they just weren't getting the kind of training they needed, Ben reflected. Jonathan was laughing and squealing as the cartoon characters slid down a mountainside.

It was funny in the cartoon, Ben thought, but sometimes that's how it felt at work, and then it wasn't so funny. The cartoon characters were bouncing from one branch and outcropping to another, their eyes comically huge, and his son couldn't stop laughing. Ben couldn't stop thinking that this was just what his workdays were like sometimes, bouncing from one problem to another and barely having time to get one issue cleaned up before another smacked into him. Forget about building and growing the practice -- he was always in crisis mode.

Ben didn't really think it was a case of having bad workers. They made every effort to hire smart, competent people. And yet those

smart people made mistakes and let things slide. He knew they didn't provide intensive training to their staff, but where would he find the time to do that? He had always figured that if he hired good people, they could pick most things up on their own.

Ben shook his head and Carmen smiled up at him questioningly. He returned her smile and willed himself to get his mind back into the present. He could think about his work problems later -- in fact, he'd have to. He sighed again, but this time not with contentment.

Maybe it was his fault.

Are the problems in his practice Dr. Ben's fault?

And... Action!

What belongs on Dr. Ben's list of must-have features for practice management software?

"Do you remember," Ben asked his wife, "how you were saying that lines in the parking lot made it easier to park cars?"

"Wow," Carmen answered, "I must have been feeling very deep and philosophical that day." She was scrolling through the local movie offerings on her phone. They had a babysitter lined up, and she was planning to enjoy a rare date night with her husband.

"It was kind of deep," said Ben. "You were talking about how it's easier to change a situation than to change the people in the situation."





“Oh, right -- we were talking about the issues at your office, right?”

“Yes, and I’ve been thinking that maybe this new practice management software might help.” He stared into space for a moment. “Well, okay, to be completely honest I’ve been thinking that maybe I’m just no good at this, but today I’m entertaining another possibility.”

Ben looked into his wife’s eyes. “Am I fooling myself?”

“Not at all!” Carmen spoke passionately. “Just imagine if I had to run the pizzeria without my fancy industrial dishwasher and my computerized ticketing system. What if I had to milk sheep and make cheese by hand and grind flour and cook in an oven in the courtyard?”

“Sounds picturesque.”

“It would be back-breaking labor. They say our modern appliances even in a home kitchen are the equivalent of having several extra pairs of hands to help. The industrial appliances make all the difference.”

“I can see that,” Ben agreed.

“So why shouldn’t having the right tools make all the difference in your practice, too?” Carmen asked triumphantly.

“So how will I know the right tools when I see them?”

“Let’s make a list.” Carmen opened an app on her phone. “You need something complete -- not a bunch of different programs that might not work together.”

“Been there and done that,” sighed Ben. “It has to be a turnkey solution that won’t require an IT department, because I don’t have one. But it has to work for all the people I do have. We don’t need information silos or duplication of efforts across the team, and we don’t want to be delayed if someone is out of the office.”

“Training would be good,” said Carmen, adding a note to the list.

“Effective training,” Ben specified, “with real human beings to answer questions if we happen to have any.”

“It would be great if you could access it on your phone,” Carmen pointed out, “in case of emergencies.”

“Or even in case of date night,” Ben smiled. “Shoot that list to me and let’s pick a movie. I can smell the popcorn already!”

What belongs on Dr. Ben’s list of must-have features for practice management software?



The Experts Respond

Dr. Brian Capra started his career in private practice in May 2002 and gained experience working in practices ranging from 300 to 1500 patient visits per week. Through the personal experience of losing one of his patients he began a search for chiropractic 'practice management software' that would help him manage patient relationships. After realizing there was no true "business management software" for chiropractors on the market Dr. Capra became frustrated. Looking outside of chiropractic, Dr. Capra found the answer he was looking for in a system that uses a very unique technological advance to give doctors better control over their patient retention, revenue, and compliance with less management time. After he implemented it in his own practice, his patient retention improved, documentation and management time was cut by 33%, and his insurance collections doubled. Faced with the crossroads, Dr. Brian decided to take that new technology and methodology to the chiropractic profession. That methodology is called Single Metric Management. In 2005 Dr. Capra co-founded Genesis Chiropractic Software which has since grown to over 3,000 users across the world.

Office teamwork is important! Failing to get everyone pulling together has revenue, cost and compliance implications.

Office staffing issues can have direct effects on revenue. There is a positive correlation between patient referrals and staff teamwork. Conversely, uncoordinated or unprofessional handling of patients leads to attrition. What's more, any time that the practice owner has to spend on front office matters is time not spent seeing patients.

Compliance issues include incomplete/incorrect documentation, interrupted care plans, and incorrect CPT/diagnosis codes. When front office personnel are unfamiliar with procedures, important matters could "slip through the cracks" -- for example, if the front office fails to collect copays and other

payments, it could potentially lead to overpayments by payers.

Ben has a systemic problem and replacing a few staff members is not a systemic solution. Since these problems can have serious consequences for the practice, he needs a serious solution. And since there is a clear effect on the bottom line, Dr. Ben should be willing to invest in the tools he needs to get everyone working together smoothly.

Candace Coleman is a practice success coach who works with providers to improve profitability, including revenue cycle management, performance analysis, office work flow optimization, compliance, system configuration, training, patient scheduling and no-show management, visit documentation, and billing process. Her purpose is to help practitioners and office staff reach their goals, improve patient care, and better manage their practice while spending less time on administrative tasks and more time with their patients.

Everyone wants to stay in control of their practice, but the game has changed and so the game plan must change. Today's busy practices, with the added burdens of new government regulations and extra documentation, can't expect to rely on "management by being in the office."

The control that everyone seeks is only gained when each member of the team knows EXACTLY what has to be done and they know how to do it. It sounds simple, but ask any stressed out practice owner, it isn't. Defining who does what and how is the first step. Then you need the ability to hold them accountable. Once that happens, then, and only then, can your office turnover stabilize because your employees will start each day with clarity of purpose and finish each day with a feeling of accomplishment. Then you have a team!

Dr. Ben needs to use the new technologies that are available to him, quit beating himself up over not being able to oversee thing the way he'd like, and move on to a stronger practice.

What Would You Do?

Ben needs a better system in his office to help with staff turnover, staff training and staff management. If he had a computer system that included task checklists, then he could automatically assign tasks to his staff and he could easily follow-up with accountability and transparency. He would be better informed too.

- **George Konold**

I'd say things are indirectly Ben's fault, in that he got himself into a position where he can't take the time to fix problems. If the office is that crazy-busy, they're likely shorthanded. That's what temps are for.

- **David Abolafia**

Being a chiro shouldn't be about managing staff. They should be focused on patients and the work of running a practice should be handle by the staff as a team. This would make everyone's lives easier and that controlled and flowing environment would affect how patients perceive the practice and people working there.

- **Andrew Kropff**

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