Create a

great
workplace

Michael R. Young* explains how to manage your manager as the basis for a happy working life.

A two-way process

The majority of practice management books focus on showing practice owners and practice managers (collectively 'the boss') how to manage their employees. The message is 'Better management equals a happier working life for the manager(s)'. But what about those who are being managed? Is there anything they can do to manage the boss and hence improve their own working environment? 'Managing' means '*succeed in doing*', but it can also mean '*be able to cope despite difficulties*'. I leave it to you to decide which definition best fits your situation.

All good working relationships are founded on trust, respect and mutual understanding. Bosses expect all three from those working around them. It is, however, a two-way process. This article will explore some of the ways in which employees can begin to build the same level of trust, respect and understanding from their boss as the boss expects from them. It is about how to build an excellent working relationship with your boss and therefore how to make *your* working life happier.

All shapes and sizes

Getting on with your boss on a personal and on a professional level is extremely important if the workplace is to be enjoyable. Spending your time in the company of someone who you don't like is not an option. The bottom line in this situation is to find another job. Bosses come in all shapes and sizes, from the practice manager acting on behalf of the 'faceless' corporate, to the hands on, single-handed, owner-manager dentist. You need to try to work out what things are important to them and what their aspirations are. Understanding what motivates a person and why they do things the way they do all helps you to get on better with them and therefore makes for a happier workplace. My advice to you would always be: 'You might not always see things from their perspective, but you should at least try.'

Being professional

If you want the boss to respect you as a professional then you should of course always behave as a professional. It is incumbent on all dental care professionals (DCPs) to conduct themselves in a professional manner, but it is

worthwhile reminding yourself of this from time to time. Dress smartly, smile, be positive, and show respect for your colleagues and *your* patients (they are your customers as well). Patients will expect everyone at the practice, not just the dentists, to at all times behave in a professional manner, and any unprofessional behaviour is unlikely to go unnoticed. Remember that your professional image should also extend beyond the four walls of the practice. Your professionalism should stand out, and will definitely not go unnoticed or unappreciated by the boss.

It is naïve to think that if you are constantly undermining the things the boss is trying to do that you will remain in your job for very long. You must always support them in what

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they are trying to achieve. If you can't, then maybe it's time to find another job. You should never forget that the boss controls the purse strings and that they are the senior decision maker; the buck stops with them. Work with the boss in the same way as you work with your colleagues to achieve mutual goals. Remember that respect is important too; you need to earn it in the same way as the boss has to. Employers value loyalty, and although it may not always be obvious that they do, eventually it will be rewarded.

Work as a team

Unfortunately, I have come across DCPs who play little power games within the practice

and sometimes even with their boss. Don't be antagonistic! If you disagree with or criticise your boss every time they make a decision eventually you will find that you are being excluded and your thoughts and opinions will no longer be sought. A boss who suspects that one of their employees is being deliberately antagonistic towards them will find ways to 'manage' that person out of the practice. Don't stir up trouble behind the boss's back, or try to humiliate the boss in an attempt to score points or to get your colleagues 'on your side'. You must all work as a team – top down and bottom up. The boss has the final say, and if they make a mistake or the wrong decision, then be mature enough to continue working as a team and help the boss recover.

Do you turn up for work every day, doing what you think needs to be done in the way you think it should be done? Instead of working like this, talk to your boss and establish what they expect from you. Often people are happy just to drift along with things not being quite right rather than risk upsetting others by pointing out problems. Take the initiative and demonstrate to the boss that you want to be able to do your job well, but that you can only do that if you know what they expect from you. Finding out what the boss expects from you could well be the spark that ignites some new thinking about how certain aspects of the practice are managed. It also lets the boss know that you have ideas you want to share with them about how things could possibly be improved. The boss will almost certainly appreciate this proactive approach.

Confidence and communication

Be confident in your work, this way you will be valued. Don't believe that the boss has all of the answers, and so if they need reassurance that they are making the right decision; they are always going to prefer to have

confident people around them for support. However, beware of being overconfident. Overconfidence can lead to problems because it is often accompanied by tunnel vision, which is when a person believes that they know all the answers and they do not therefore stop and take the time to see what is going on around them.

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Dental practices can occasionally be stressful environments to work in no matter how much everyone tries to eliminate it. Anxious patients, fretful children, and even sometimes, anxious dentists! Misunderstandings between members of the team or between the boss and you will inevitably lead to increased personal stress. Unfortunately the majority of problems in any workplace arise through poor communication or worse, a total lack of communication. Make sure that you do not become part of this lack of communication problem, by having all of the relevant information *before* you communicate with anyone, and that you have an idea of the preferred outcome. You will prevent misunderstandings by communicating effectively. If you think that there has been a misunderstanding between the boss and yourself, then ask for a meeting so that the matter can be cleared up. It is amazing how often small things can, if allowed to, escalate into major differences. Your boss does not want an unhappy workplace any more than you do, so help to maintain your happy working environment by

communicating effectively with not just the boss, but with everyone in the practice.

A happy workplace

You might be doing a great job but feel, rightly or wrongly, that the boss does not appreciate your efforts. This can lead to resentment on your part and eventually to a souring of the relationship. Don't harbour resentment; you should tackle all 'conflicts' in a mature way by again talking to the boss, putting your side to them and telling them how you feel. It is surprising how often a 'clear-the-air' meeting, as long as it is conducted in a mature and constructive atmosphere, can lay the foundations for an even better working environment.

Being expected to do too much, or being told to perform tasks that you are not legally qualified to carry out, can cause stress and an unhappy workplace. When conflicts like this arise, tackle them head on, but in a non-destructive and mature way.

A happy workplace is one where everyone has shared values, both personal and professional. All relationships have their ups and downs, but it is the way in which you handle the downs that will eventually create a good working environment. Building trust, respect and understanding between you and your boss, and not forgetting about everyone else with whom you work, is all part and parcel of managing the boss.

So, having read this article, which of the two definitions of 'managing' applies to you? Are you able to succeed in doing, or are you simply able to cope despite difficulties? I hope that you have learnt something here that is going to help you to manage the boss and make your working life that little bit more enjoyable.

I want to leave you with one final thought. Bearing in mind that you probably spend more time at work than you do at home, you owe it to yourself to work as hard as you can to create not just a *good* working environment, but a *great* working environment.

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