

## Practice**life**

# Managing underperformance in your team

Tackling underperformers can be one of the more challenging elements of managing your practice. Practice Plan brings together **Sheila Scott** and **Sarah Buxton** to examine the tricky issue of how to tackle underperformers

**Sheila Scott:** Your job as a business owner is to provide guidance to employees to help them do their job to the standard required. To fulfil this, you have to do two things.

Firstly, you should define performance standards (the standard you need every job done to) as specifically and factually as possible. If you need the phone answered within four rings, with a smile, a name and the practice's name, you need to make this clear – verbally and in writing.

If you need your team to always be helpful and encouraging to patients, through asking questions and providing appropriate answers, you should define these too. Be clear, discuss what you need done and how, and discuss it often.

Secondly, you must talk to individual team members when they fail to perform to the standards you require of them. You need to be clear, and factual, but not critical, when describing what they have done/what has happened, eg, 'You said X to patient Y' rather than 'You were rude'. You should explain why what they did/did not do was a problem or affected the business, and then ask a question to start a discussion about what happened/what the impact was and/or what they can do to achieve a better result/the standard you require.

This conversation requires a real skill that very few managers naturally have – most of us have to learn how to talk in this way. But, the better you do this, the more influence



you have to guide others to higher standards of performance. What is key to success though is early intervention – nip all issues in the bud.

**Sarah Buxton:** Sheila is correct. Addressing performance issues as soon as they arise is important from a legal perspective, and can also have a number of advantages for both employer and employee; for example, an employee is more likely to turn their performance around. Offering training and support can be positive.

It may also become obvious to an employer that there are other issues that need to be addressed such as ill-health or disability, problems with child care, harassment or bullying, or excessive workload leading to stress. Each of these issues may create legal liabilities for the employer if they do not seek to address them straight away.

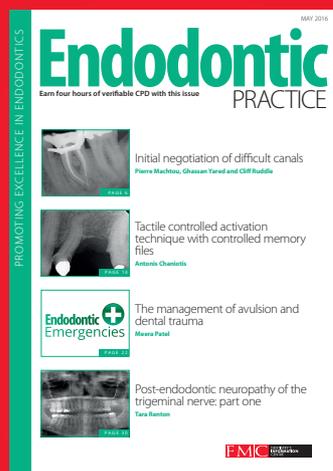
Dealing with underperformance can be one of the most challenging aspects of running a practice. Standards of performance are liable to change as the business or role evolves or new technology becomes available. The appropriate performance standard must be judged according to the employee's current contractual requirement and role.

For new recruits, the probationary period is an ideal time for the employer to assess the employee's suitability for the role. It is common for a probationary period to be between three and six months. The employer can also have the right to extend the probationary period.

For existing employees, a performance appraisal system that is diligently pursued by the employer can also have a positive impact on employees who are under performing. It is important that appraisals should be conducted honestly and provide true feedback.

Unfortunately, it can be the case that no matter how many appraisals or one-to-one meetings occur, the employment relationship may come to the end of the road and dismissing an employee for poor performance is a fair reason to dismiss. There is always a fair procedure to be followed in these circumstances and legal advice should always be sought. If an employee is becoming a strain on the practice this may be the only option, so always bear it in mind. **D**

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Sheila Scott is a business consultant with over 25 years' experience as a coach to dentists and has qualifications in psychology, marketing, mediation and counselling.



Sarah Buxton is a director and employment and HR solicitor at FTA Law, specialising in employment law for the dental and healthcare profession. She provides the HR and employment service to ADAM members and provides pro bono advice to Bridge2aid.

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