



## Friendship in the Workplace

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If we imitated management, as taught by television, no one in his or her right mind would want to have an employee, who has a best friend at work. (Ever watch reruns of Lucy and Ethel in the chocolate factory?) I often hear dentists say, “I hire people to work, not to make friends.”

There is a “Management Myth” out there that workplace friendships aren’t necessary and may even get in the way. But, decades of Gallup research runs counter to that myth. In fact, they have shown that having a best friend at work can turn a moderately engaged worker into a highly engaged one. This upgrade is significant because highly engaged workers contribute more to the bottom line, and in our case, we frequently see positive relationships in the dental office significantly impacting the patient’s satisfaction.

Therefore, fostering friendships should be a management priority. Research done by Gallup and others shows mul-

iple management benefits are derived from fostering friendships in the workplace.

Fostering friendships in the workplace can help achieve other management goals, such as minimizing errors and encouraging initiative. It seems that most of us are somewhat skeptical, though, about asking the Pankey-Gallup Workplace Audit Survey question, “Do you have a best friend at work?” Even some of the Gallup researchers initially wondered about the usefulness of this question. But, after literally thousands of surveys were statistically researched, they discovered friendship trumped such seemingly obvious employee motivators as pay and benefits. Profitability, productivity, and patient (customer) satisfaction and loyalty all proved to be highly correlated with increased workplace performance and also a high incidence of best friends in the workplace.

The Developmental Management literature, which is a proponent of personal and professional growth being an integral part of the workplace, has continued to reference much of the workplace research discoveries coming out of Gallup’s Q12 survey. The Q12 contains 12 of the 25 questions that have been asked to over 1,500 dental auxiliaries as a part of the Pankey Patient Satisfaction Survey process over the last seven years.

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Over more than a decade, literally thousands of workers have had the opportunity to add to the Gallup database and to the Pankey-Gallup database. Gallup administered Q12 to a random sample of U.S. workers, who are 18 and older, in late 2000 and early 2001. Fifty-one percent of the participants, who strongly agreed with the statement “I have a best friend at work,” were engaged in their workplace compared with only ten percent of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed. (The bar graph on this page came from that study.)

Contrary to popular belief, workplace friendships boost profits through profit-enhancing behaviors. Having a best friend at work enhanced employee longevity and decreased turnover. Workers were more satisfied with their pay and benefits, and they would recommend their business as a great place to work, feeling better about themselves working to their full potential.

Other research confirms Gallup’s findings. In 1997, Karen A. John, a professor of Management at Wharton Business School, told Harvard Business Review, “Although friends working together do socialize, their interaction process greases the wheels for better work related communication as long as they are dedicated to the task at hand or to the company’s overarching goals.”

The good news for managers is that a dearth of workplace friendships is rather easy to fix. Social activities aren’t the only way to build friendships. Within the dental office, a number of intentional processes can be implemented to facilitate growth in friendship and intimacy. A Morning Huddle can become more than just a schedule review, even though its primary function is commonly to prepare for individual patients and create positive patient experiences. The morning huddle can also serve as a time for emotional clearing so the team is ready for the day. When staff members spend as much time together as happens in a dental office, time should be set aside to listen to one another. Call it sharing time. It helps people become “present” for the day and for others. It develops focus in the process.

Other opportunities for contact occur in staff meetings. You can start every meeting with having those present share a recent success story (something they feel good about) with a patient or in their personal life. These stories become contact moments during which you hear a person’s deeply held values, and this leads to deeper relationships. An off-site get together (whether it be a social, team-building retreat, or celebration event) will enhance relationships. In these settings, the skills necessary to be present for one another and listen differently are experienced, developed

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and learned in the doing. They are not learned any other way! These skills, when developed, are all transferable and made available with patients and in your personal life at home and elsewhere. That is good news!

**One caveat:** Best friends are a great thing in a good workplace, and a bad thing in a bad workplace. Take, for instance, a workplace where employees describe the manager as dictatorial, receive little recognition, and do not have a clear idea of what's expected. In that setting, best friends will spend time commiserating, which will exacerbate the counterproductive us-versus-them tone of the workplace. Clearly the management challenge, in such instances, is to improve overall conditions, not to discourage friendships. Good managers have nothing to lose and a lot to gain by encouraging friendships to develop.

When we compare data from the Pankey-Gallup Patient Satisfaction Survey and Workplace Audit Survey, we learn patient satisfaction is high in the dental offices where staff responds affirmatively to the following:

- I am very optimistic about my future in this dental office.
- I have fun working in this dental office.
- I enjoy staff meetings.
- I feel great pride working in this dental office.
- At work, my opinion seems to count.

The appropriate questions for you to ask yourself are: What do I do, intentionally on a regular basis, to promote these positive outcomes? How should I live knowing what we now know? Think about these. Wonder about them. Put all of this in your crucible and rub it around for a long while, but don't wait too long to get started! Between now and the next time, I want to hear a little noise coming from your mortar and pestle.