Practitioners’ expectations of the kind of manager they want for their practice vary considerably in terms of experience and skills. How guilty are you of promoting a nurse or receptionist to a management role without determining the skills gap and providing the necessary training? It is a common scenario in our industry.

Practitioners have a responsibility to their teams and to the financial success of their practices to appoint someone who either has the necessary skills or has the capacity to learn them in the appropriate time frame. How realistic are your expectations and how can you ensure your management role results in success?

Creating and managing realistic expectations

Expectations are difficult to control and impossible to turn off. According to Brazos Consulting, “Expectations are deeper and broader than ‘requirements’. Expectation is your vision of a future state or action, usually unspoken but which is critical to your success.” By learning to identify and influence what you expect, and by ensuring it is clearly communicated, understood and agreed with your manager, you can dramatically improve the quality, impact and effectiveness of your business.

Expectations are created by many different circumstances. It may be something you said in the way that you said it, something you or someone else did, or an expectation of your prospective manager based on his or her previous experience. The vital point here is that expectations, whether right or wrong, rational or otherwise, are not developed in a vacuum. You should consider instances when you were let down by your manager and ask yourself how that expectation was derived. Was it based on an agreement with your manager after a discussion or was it based on something you said or thought in passing? In retrospect, you may wonder how realistic that expectation was and why you thought your manager was in the strongest possible position to fulfill it.

In my experience, the following scenarios are typical of how unrealistic expectations are created:

- The practitioner is busy and needs someone to take charge. He or she chooses the “best of the bunch”, hoping he or she will learn on the job.
- The new manager has his or her expectations of the job and these are often unrealistic.
- No detailed job description or objectives are ever provided. No on-the-job or any other type of training is provided; the practitioner simply assumes the manager will learn as he or she goes along.
- The manager is excited about the new position. For some, the empowerment, the title and the kudos mean a great deal; for others, the challenge and the task at hand mean more. When reality hits, so does the realisation that the original motivating factors are no longer as important.
- Both practitioner and manager are reticent to discuss what is not working and often brush the issues under the carpet until it is too late.
- Resentment grows and what is at stake—the patients, the practice and the staff—outweighs the actual issue, which is poorly managed expectations.

Of course, there are many practices managed by very capable staff members. However, for all the well-functioning practitioner–manager relationships, there are more people in these roles who prefer not to talk about the problems inherent within and who are only too glad for someone else to address the issues.

One of my aims is to facilitate management teams to assess where they are at present, to plan for appropriate change and to implement that change. The outcome is that a support system is lifted from your shoulders and focus moves to a united partnership working towards the success of the practice. In order to move forward, however, you must recognize where you are now.

An alternative approach

The first step towards achieving a successful management partnership is to honestly appraise your current situation. If anything I have said so far has touched a nerve, if frustration exists between you and the manager, or if you simply think things could be better, then acknowledge the fact and take action. Knowing what action to take for the best is probably the most difficult thing to assess.

The following are tips on getting started.

- Vocalize your vision, agree that your vision is realistic and share it with your team. Create a job description with and a training plan for your manager, as well as identify skills gaps and create smart objectives with and for her or him. Also agree and schedule regular one-to-one meetings and plan to assess and review with your manager. Most importantly, however, keep communicating.

Drive your success

Expectations always exist, even if we do not know what they are and despite them often being unrealistic. Managers have expectations of their roles and their employers have expectations of the person given responsibility for managing the practice. The problem is that mismatched expectations can lead to misunderstandings, frayed nerves and ruffled feathers. More seriously, they often lead to flawed systems, failed projects and a drain on resources.

There is nothing wrong with having expectations; the trick is to communicate them and to agree how they might be satisfied over time and with the right support. Managed expectations drive your success.

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