



TIPS FOR RETAINING STAFF AND KEEPING THEM HAPPY

A solid team is at the core of any successful practice.

Here's how you can do your part as a leader to ensure employee satisfaction.

A ROUNDTABLE WITH MIKE CYMBOR, OD, FAAO; MILA IOUSSIFOVA, OD, FAAO, CNS; AND CAITLIN MORRISON, OD, FAAO, FSLS

Having trouble with employee turnover, or just want to be proactive so you (hopefully) never have to deal with it? We spoke with three established practice owners and asked them to share their secrets to building and maintaining a strong optometric team in today's world. Read their insights for retaining staff and keeping them happy and productive.

— Alex Brodin, Associate Editor

Modern Optometry (MOD): Tell us about your practice.

Mike Cymbor, OD, FAAO: Nittany Eye Associates has five locations in Pennsylvania. We employ 12 optometrists, one ophthalmologist, 18 technicians, and more than 60 staff members.

Mila Ioussifova, OD, FAAO, CNS: South Waterfront Eye Care is a full-scope optometric practice with a boutique optical. We provide medical eye care with a special emphasis on dry eye disease management, offering advanced treatments such as intense pulsed light

therapy, radiofrequency, TearScience LipiFlow Thermal Pulsation System (Johnson & Johnson Vision), TearCare System (Sight Sciences), and MiBo ThermoFlo (MiBo Medical Group). We perform in-office procedures, including blood draws for autologous serum and platelet-rich plasma eye drop preparations, and offer aesthetic services. As a certified nutrition specialist, I offer personalized nutrition counseling tailored to enhance ocular health. Our team has 11 members: two optometrists, an office manager, two patient coordinators, two opticians, two aestheticians, and two virtual assistants—one of whom also serves as our dedicated scribe.

Caitlin Morrison, OD, FAAO, FSL: Mine is a private practice with one optometrist (soon to be two!) that focuses exclusively on specialty contact lens designs. We focus on scleral lenses, gas permeable lenses, prosthetic lenses, and contact lenses with prism. The average patient we see has some form of corneal irregularity and comes to us as their last resort to see clearly again after many surgeries or traumas to the eye.

I have three other staff members: my right-hand person, who helps with managing the business; my scheduler, who works remotely; and my executive assistant (also remote), who supports me with both personal and professional tasks.

MOD: What strategies do you use to retain staff?

Dr. Morrison: My staff's happiness is a top priority for me, not only because I want to retain the same team for the long-term, but also because I want them to enjoy what they're doing and feel their work is meaningful. I take full responsibility for my business, so if a mistake is made by any team member, I take it as my own fault. This keeps the culture of the office positive, and when problems arise (which they always do), my team can work on strategies to alleviate them together. There is no culture of blame in my practice.

I also place significant value on spending time with family and cultivating a high quality-of-life outside the office. With this mindset, I try to make our schedule as flexible as possible so that my staff don't feel pressured to save up days off. My practice is 4 years old, and I offer as much as I can to my employees. Right now, that means providing benefits such as health insurance and 401K programs.

Dr. Cymbor: The biggest factor for retaining team members and boosting their job satisfaction comes down to the culture. People want to work for companies that care about people, including their clients, patients,

etc, and their staff. Rewarding team members for effort, having a meaningful mission, engaging team members in shaping goals, direction, and improvements—all of this makes a difference. Staff members knowing they can provide feedback and ideas and voice their concerns and that we will listen and try and do what we can is directly related to engagement.

To Dr. Morrison's point, more and more research is showing remote or hybrid work is the way of the future—as is the 4-day work week, or some sort of adjusted work week that allows a better work-life balance. We have to think outside the box to find a way to improve our ability to offer and incorporate more flexible or hybrid work opportunities within our practices. Being successful at managing such flexibility will require clear protocols, policies, expectations, and performance data/benchmarks—in short, a system to ensure accountability.

With that being said, hybrid and remote options come with a variety of challenges, such as personnel oversight and management, IT and equipment needs, and potential costs of noncompliance for the company. It's certainly easier to manage a team in-person. However, I believe it's important to find a way to incorporate hybrid

options to meet staffing levels and retain team members.

Other ideas to make remote work better include cross-training team members and nonremote staff in hybrid roles across the practice so they can participate in the hybrid rotation. My practice tends to look for employees who can work 40 hours a week, one to two late nights, including Saturdays, etc. Being open to a variety of scheduling needs allows us to work with our employees and still meet the coverage we need. Being understanding of family and personal schedule needs, within reason, and avoiding strict black-and-white policies that remove the human aspect from the equation are two key strategies.

Dr. Ioussifova: Although competitive pay, medical benefits, and contributions to a retirement plan are undoubtedly important, it is equally crucial to cultivate an environment where everyone finds purpose, experiences inclusion, and has the opportunity to grow. We consistently invest in our staff, whether they aspire to advance their careers through certifications or broaden their knowledge by attending conferences and meetings. Fostering a positive and supportive culture in the clinic has



WE CONSISTENTLY INVEST IN OUR STAFF, WHETHER THEY ASPIRE TO ADVANCE THEIR CAREERS THROUGH CERTIFICATIONS OR BROADEN THEIR KNOWLEDGE BY ATTENDING CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS.

— MILA IOUSSIFOVA, OD, FAAO, CNS

“



THE BIGGEST FACTOR FOR RETAINING TEAM MEMBERS AND BOOSTING THEIR JOB SATISFACTION COMES DOWN TO THE CULTURE.

— MIKE CYMBOR, OD, FAAO

”

been imperative for us, and we have successfully achieved this since starting the practice cold 10 years ago.

MOD: What would you say is the number-one factor that promotes good employee retention? Conversely, what is the top driver of turnover?

Dr. Ioussifova: I would say the primary factor in retaining top-notch employees is a positive company culture that places high value on work-life balance. Our commitment to this includes not operating on weekends and closing for a 1-hour lunch every day. We also strive to create a stimulating work environment by offering training and education for new services and products. Although the constant implementation of innovative treatments, products, and techniques adds excitement for some, it's important to acknowledge that this dynamic environment might pose challenges for others and potentially contribute to turnover.

Dr. Morrison: I believe the number-one factor for promoting employee retention is that the employee feels valued and is doing valuable work. This can be seen in how a boss treats their employees: employee compensation, benefits, flexibility with time off, how they deal with conflict, and whether they know each employee personally and understand their individual goals.

The top driver of employee turnover, from what I have seen in other businesses, is the opposite: employees not feeling valued. Owning a business is very difficult, and it's easy to get stuck in the weeds and forget to acknowledge the great things our team members do. I remember when I was working for another doctor, at the end of every day he would always say, “Thank you for your help.” It was small, but it really stuck with me.

Dr. Cymbor: Help your staff find purpose in what they do. Having a purpose and working toward something bigger than yourself is at the core of what most people want. Gallup research shows that pay and benefits is the most common reason employees left their job in 2022, but still, it was only named 20% of the time as the primary reason for leaving a job.¹

MOD: Can you describe a time when an employee expressed dissatisfaction and how you addressed it?

Dr. Morrison: Patient care is difficult because the constant human interaction can lead to burnout, a feeling I have had employees share with me and can see on their faces when we go through weeks of busy schedules.

My motto for 2023 was, “How can we make this easier?” When I detect an employee is over-worked, I jump

in and look at what they are doing and figure out ways to make it faster, easier, or automated. Could a phone call be a simple email with a premade template? We discuss such solutions often. If a task takes more than a few clicks to complete, we try to figure out how to free up more of our time.

Dr. Cymbor: Transparency is so important. We once had a strong employee who was dissatisfied with her lack of opportunity for leadership. We didn't have a position at the time, so we expressed how valuable she was and explained that she would have an opportunity when one became available. A short time later, a leadership position opened, and we promoted her.

Dr. Ioussifova: If a staff member expresses dissatisfaction, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the issue privately. However, if the concern affects the entire team and clinic, it's time to bring it to the attention of the team. Developing a concrete action plan to tackle the problem is key, and it's essential to follow up to ensure that the issue is fully resolved.

We hold monthly meetings where each staff member is encouraged to share concerns or suggestions for improvement. In addition, we conduct daily huddles at the beginning of the day, not only to prepare for the day ahead, but also to maintain connection and awareness, giving us a chance to promptly address any internal issues.

MOD: How do you handle conflicts that may arise, such as a dispute between staff, and maintain a harmonious team atmosphere? What strategies have been most effective?

Dr. Cymbor: Although not every staff member will agree with all our decisions, we must attempt to be as transparent as possible. If the issue involves one staff member, then meeting one-on-one is best. If the issue is between one or more staff

members, meeting with the whole team may be more helpful.

Dr. Morrison: To be honest, I haven't had many disputes. My team is very mature and understanding. Because I am very direct and transparent, if a dispute ever happened, I would simply talk to the person individually and then together. Again, not assigning blame is important, as we are all the same team.

Dr. Ioussifova: Recently, a small miscommunication occurred between two team members, and we came to a resolution quickly. First, we had to approach the employees with an unbiased perspective, ensuring objectivity by carefully listening to each side individually, and then have a joint discussion. Addressing the issue immediately helped avoid building tension between the two team members involved.

MOD: What is your approach to career development and ensuring employees feel supported in their professional growth?

Dr. Morrison: We have individual meetings about this exact topic once or twice annually, where we discuss goals for staff members' careers and personal lives, including how I can assist in achieving them. For example, I originally had an employee working on our marketing material. They realized that they preferred to grow in the operations side of the business, thinking of unique solutions for best practices. We pivoted her role and hired an outside agency to assist with marketing.

Dr. Cymbor: Growth fosters continued engagement. This doesn't necessarily mean leadership opportunities for everyone; it could mean advancing knowledge and skillset. Cross-training, again, is a great way to engage team members who are feeling bored, stuck, or just want to learn more (assuming they are already meeting expectations). Having

managers and leaders who can coach and provide feedback also helps.

Dr. Ioussifova: Making sure my team grows professionally is a big deal to me. I put my money where my mouth is by investing in their courses or workshops, just like I invest in myself. I'm all for supporting any extra education or certifications that can boost their knowledge and skills and help grow the practice. We also like to get out there and attend events and conferences together for inspiration, education, and hands-on learning.

MOD: What is the most important piece of advice you can offer about leadership?

Dr. Morrison: Leadership is taking full responsibility for everything that happens in the business. When you're a practice owner, the buck stops with you, so there is really nobody to complain to or blame if things go wrong. The day I fully accepted this was the day that I knew I had the power to change or create what I wanted.

Dr. Ioussifova: At the heart of leadership is communication—listening and following through. Stay present, understand what your staff needs, and show your appreciation for them.



WHEN I DETECT AN EMPLOYEE IS OVER-WORKED, I JUMP IN AND LOOK AT WHAT THEY ARE DOING AND FIGURE OUT WAYS TO MAKE IT FASTER, EASIER, OR AUTOMATED.

— CAITLIN MORRISON, OD, FAAO, FSLs

Dr. Cymbor: Leadership can be rewarding and frustrating. It can make or break a team member's morale, job satisfaction, and retention. Leaders are responsible for maintaining accountability, providing coaching and development, communicating a company's mission, and setting the tone for the culture. How we communicate with our team makes all the difference. ■

1. Top reasons for leaving a job. Gallup. Accessed February 8, 2024. www.gallup.com/467702/indicator-employee-retention-attraction.aspx

MIKE CYMBOR, OD, FAAO

- Optometrist and Co-owner, Nittany Eye Associates, State College, Pennsylvania
- mcymbor@nittanyeye.com; Instagram @drmsee
- Acknowledgement: Dr. Cymbor's portions of the article were completed with input from his practice manager, Elizabeth Elliott
- Financial disclosure: None disclosed

MILA IOUSSIFOVA, OD, FAAO, CNS

- Optometrist and Owner, South Waterfront Eye Care, Portland, Oregon
- dr.mila@swec.us; Instagram @eyedoctormila
- Financial disclosure: None disclosed

CAITLIN MORRISON, OD, FAAO, FSLs

- Optometrist and Owner, In Focus: Specialty Contact Lens & Vision Solutions, Scottsdale, Arizona
- office@youreyesinfocus.com; Instagram @eyesplain
- Financial disclosure: Key Opinion Leader, Consultant (Bausch + Lomb)