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Practice Management Information for Implant Dentists

WE ARE FAMILY. REALLY?

BY DALE DAUTEN

“To the family – that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to.” A toast from a Dodie Smith novel

Whenever I talk to groups about leadership, some executive will invariably announce, with obvious self-regard, “My department is like family.” And I invariably think of Woody Allen’s watch: “I’ve very proud of my gold pocket watch. My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold me this watch.”

What got me thinking about workplace “families” was the response to a young engineer I’d written about, one whose bosses always seemed to feel he’d spent too much or too little time on a project. I opined that his bosses, engineers who’d moved into management, would likely see the department as a machine. The unintended consequence of that metaphor is that you set upper limits on quality – you don’t want to install one part that’s “too good” for the machine – and thus the mindset becomes anti-hero; excellence becomes the ghoul in the machine.

And that brings us back to the Number One workplace metaphor: the department as family. However, what family is really like an office team? I don’t know of anyone who’s walked into the parental home and said, “Mom, I just got an offer from another Mom and, well, it’s a great offer. Her lasagne? Amazing. And she irons. And my roommates think she’s fun. It’s a better situation for me.”

What can a mother say? Maybe this: “Can you put in the good word for me – I think your father has maxed out his potential and I’m looking for an upgrade.”

But the problem with the family metaphor is that the employees are “the children,” always asking permission, asking for a bigger allowance, asking for help, for answers. Wise managers want just the opposite – they want to be asking questions, not giving answers. It’s the difference between grade school and grad school.

Further, wise managers understand turnover, a concept that just doesn’t fit the “family” model. The best bosses encourage turnover – they take satisfaction is seeing their star employees get better offers. (One of my favorite gifted bosses, Dan Schweiker, co-CEO of China Mist Tea, refers to such employees as his “graduates.”) And the best bosses understand that sometimes you have to tell someone they just

don't fit in and have to leave. (Try explaining that to a family member, not to mention justifying it to the rest of the family.)

So what is the best metaphor for management and employees? As I've studied great bosses, I've mostly seen workplace relationships that struck me as *a group of allies*. They share a bond via a shared cause. In the best organizations, that cause is service. With allies, you don't have to try to be friends, much less family; no, you just have to recognize that each is helping the others, aiding the cause. The leader doesn't have to go around trying to make everyone be likeable; no, he or she just has to make sure everyone's work is admirable. This is a liberating notion, freeing a workplace to become great by creating the opportunity to achieve the three great workplace freedoms: Freedom from management, mediocrity and morons.

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