Q *I've found that the introduction of each and every additional member of staff brings with it enormous headaches. How do you keep so many staff happy and motivated under one roof?*

There are a number of strategies that I've implemented to achieve a positive and dynamic work environment at Smile Solutions. Most of them began with addressing my own mindset, questioning the truth behind my internal belief systems. As a business owner, you have to take responsibility for the happiness and motivation of each and every staff member in your care within the work environment. To aid you in the process, you need to consider the following:

- **Become actively involved in putting out the spot fires before they become major bush fires.** In my one-on-one business coaching experience I hear a lot of comments regarding staff conflict issues along the lines of *'It's not for me to deal with their problems'*, or *'Let them work it out themselves'*, or *'I can't understand how mature people can't solve their own issues'*. This stand-back approach does have its benefits in promoting conflict resolution amongst staff. However, it is often over-utilised by busy clinicians who use it to avoid involvement. It's all about timing. Step in too early and you become part of the problem; stand back for too long and you will almost certainly be faced with irreversible damage. 1). Put thought into your timing; 2). Ask others in your team who are not involved in the conflict whether they believe your intervention is required; 3). Encourage others in your leadership group to extinguish spot fires, then oversee this; and 4). If in doubt, take action - procrastination can only do you and your whole team great harm. Like it or not, your role as practice principal includes 'counselling' your team members at times. Staff must be 'managed' to work together coherently, and some of your staff require more attention than others. Within reason, that is quite OK. It is a constant challenge: remember that, just when things are cruising, someone brings a box of matches to work!
- **Humour, fun and a positive mood in the environment are fundamental.** A survey of my entire team at Smile Solutions revealed that they most value communication, friendship, fun and humour in our work environment. These factors rated higher than pay rises, work conditions and staff amenities. There needs to be the sound of laughter in your practice, especially during lunch breaks. If you personally have forgotten the art of laughter you will find it difficult to genuinely connect with staff. As a principal, your role is to propagate morale, even if it means taking yourself a little less seriously at times. You need to create a mood that allows people to feel comfortable laughing off situations and moving on with a little bit of humour.
- **Communication in the form of tiered meetings.** Instigate as much communication in the environment as possible. At Smile Solutions we try not to hold military-style weekly meetings for all the staff. We have found that the effectiveness of such meetings eventually wears off. Less regular and more spontaneous meetings can be extremely effective in motivating your team and homing in on areas of positive reinforcement and/or negative concerns. Also encourage tiered meetings. That is, organise a meeting, say, for nurses only, or maybe one for the dentists and the reception/management staff, or maybe one with yourself and members of your leadership group. Different combinations of meetings held less regularly generate communication on different levels between staff members. Meetings of a tiered nature promote exploration of issues at a deeper level between affected parties.
- **The single greatest motivating factor for staff is respect and positive feedback from the principal and the leadership group.** Our in-house research has shown that nurses are motivated somewhat differently to reception staff, and differently to assistant dentists and dental hygienists. However, the common thread across our entire team is the need for positive feedback and respect. Positive feedback does not come in the form of incentives, pay rises, or so-called 'taking care of your staff', or even telling others about the positive performance of a staff member. In its simplest and purest form, it requires you to tell a team member the particular reasons why you are proud of them and are happy with their overall performance. Praise needs to be given directly to the individual, at times privately and at times in an open forum. As a tradition now, in the speech I give at our Christmas lunch and annual dinner, I make a point of mentioning each and every staff member one at a time and telling everyone the reasons why I believe they have been an amazing success. This speech used to take only a few minutes, but now, with a team of 40, it can take over an hour. The roaring and clapping that goes on can sometimes be deafening. In my normal week, I also take the time to privately and spontaneously meet with my staff individually in order to give them a verbal boost.
- **Managing the confidence levels of your team members greatly affects the motivation levels of the group.** In my 'Breaking Glass Ceilings' seminars, we delve deeply into factors relating to our own, and our team's, confidence levels. In summary, the following areas are some of the reasons why staff can be mismanaged into a state of lowered self-esteem in the workplace:
1. The unrealistic expectations we set for ourselves and our team that, in our minds, seem so achievable but in reality are rarely met.
2. The need we have for 'total control of our environment' and the resulting associated stress;
3. Flawed goal setting principles for ourselves and our staff, where the end game is a constantly moving target and nothing is ever good enough;
4. Ineffective delegation principles and techniques, resulting in staff who are either under-burdened (and therefore feel they are a wasted asset) or over-burdened (where they can eventually suffer burnout);
5. The creation of a mindset in the team where successes are taken in our stride and failures are magnified - resulting in a fear of failure that slows progress and spreads procrastination.

Simply put, increased staff confidence = increased staff motivation = increased staff productivity.

If you are unable to attend one of Dr Pajouhesh's seminars, please email your questions to kia@smilesolutions.com.au for publication in a future edition of Australasian Dental Practice.