

Leadership & the Sandwich: How to Coach with Winning Results

He awoke with the same feeling of dread that he went to sleep with. Today was the day he had to “deal” with Josie. Josie was his new dental assistant who had been with the practice for four months. Josie already was popular with the team; she had high energy, a great smile, but drove him crazy with her tardiness and her sense of non-caring about it.

As he sat in his office at lunchtime looking vacantly at the computer screen that he didn’t know why he purchased in the first place, he stressed over how he was going to handle the conversation with Josie. He had scheduled it for the end of the day, and as much as he would like to think of a reason to cancel, he knew the rest of the team was aware of the meeting and wanted something done about Josie’s tardiness. He was stuck. He knew she would cry when he talked with her and maybe even quit. His sense of dread grew bigger and bigger.

He reached into his backpack and took out the lunch his wife Misty had made for him. He unwrapped the clinging plastic wrapping and stared at the sandwich – his appetite gone as his anxiety increased. He saw the two slices of whole wheat bread separated by a thick layer of turkey, tomato and lettuce – the meat of the sandwich.

Hmmmm – the meat of the sandwich. What was the meat of his meeting with Josie? How could he get to the meat without causing upset and tears? Perhaps I need to put it between two slices of bread, he thought. If I did that, what would the bread represent? He munched his sandwich with renewed vigor. Suddenly, he was actually looking forward to the meeting.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly. After the staff left, he sat down with Josie in his office using the two armchairs facing each other in front of his old oak desk. In his head, he had practiced exactly what he was going to say.

Josie sat quietly, clearly concerned about the meeting, her face taut and stressed. He remembered the sandwich and the first slice of bread; I must deliver the bread first. He took a breath and began...

“Josie, thank you for staying to see me. I want to tell you what a joy it is having you on our team. I love your enthusiasm and the way you smile. My team adores you and the patients say great things about you.” Whew! He had delivered the first slice of bread; now for the meat: “And what must change in order for you to grow and succeed with the practice is timeliness. What is not working for me is your lateness. We are very committed to being on time and putting our patients’ needs first. What would have to happen in order for you to be on time?” he asked. He sat and waited for her response. Josie shifted in her chair and then went on to tell a story about why she was late. He smiled and said, “I can appreciate the challenges you are having and to support our vision and purpose, you must be here on time. I need a commitment from you that you will get this handled.” Josie seemed to understand, smiled and committed to be on time. “Let’s you and I meet in two weeks to review progress,” he said.

He felt good. He had delivered the meat – now for the second slice of bread. He repeated what he had said with the first slice of bread, telling her how much he appreciated having her in the practice. She left happy and he felt great and very much in control.

In reflecting on what he had accomplished he realized that he could use the “sandwich” approach anytime he felt the need to coach a team member on a sensitive issue. He was on his way to becoming a true leader.

How many ways could you use the sandwich approach to get a better result?