



Mary H. Osborne, Resources

PRACTICE RENEWAL

A Leadership Guide for Dentists

A Hiring Map

Hiring is one of the ongoing responsibilities and one of the ever-present opportunities in owning a progressive small business. As you change, your employees' lives change, and the needs of the business change, and you will find yourself in the process of hiring again.

If you are not hiring now, you will likely be hiring in the future — to enlarge your staff, to replace a treasured employee who is moving on in his or her life, or to replace an employee who did not work out well. Regardless of the circumstances, *hiring is always a challenge and always an opportunity.*

Sometimes seeing the hiring process as an opportunity is difficult. Hiring takes time and energy just like anything else you do to make your practice successful. It may seem like an unwelcome distraction from your forward progress.

On the other hand, hiring can be an adventure that contributes significantly to the growth of your practice — if you take the time to do it with intention and commitment. There are often “gems” out there hoping to work in a place where they can shine. Like any treasure, they are most easily found with a map. This “Hiring Map” will not find the treasure for you, but like any good treasure map, it will tell you where to look.

Before You Start Looking

Before you set out on your treasure hunt, ask yourself what you will need to get through the process. How long will it take? How can you prepare for the journey? What resources can you utilize?

Consider a six-week process. Although the process may be longer or shorter, that is a good time frame for which to prepare yourself. Try to organize yourself for six weeks, so the practice continues to run smoothly, and you still have the energy to devote to the hiring process. How could you reorganize the group to accomplish what you need for six weeks without burning everyone out? Determine how you can continue to consistently deliver the quality of care your patients expect of you.

Think of ways to change your schedule to allow a smaller team the time necessary to deal with each patient. It does not make sense to try to do what you have always done with fewer and/or less experienced people. Try to find duties that can be taken out of the flow of your day and completed after business hours or even off-site. Tasks such as data entry, word processing, lab work, and accounts payable can potentially be put into a new schedule.

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Temporary employees may help lighten your workload. There are a number of ways you can utilize temps:

- ◆ You may want to use your experienced employees for patient contact, and use temporary help for behind-the-scenes tasks, such as filing, scrubbing instruments, entering data into the computer, etc. Knowing that your patients are being cared for by people you trust will help keep your stress level down and your energy up.
- ◆ Think of other experienced people you could call on to help out for a couple of months. Consider family members, former employees, or others in dentistry who are not currently employed on a full-time basis. How about someone with a small child who does not want to work full-time and would enjoy a temporary position? Be specific about the length of time you will need someone.
- ◆ Think creatively. Perhaps there is a hygienist or dental assistant you could use as a temp while your permanent hygienist or assistant works at the front desk, even for a couple of days a week. Freeing people who know your practice best to use that knowledge effectively during a transition may be more cost-effective than hiring a temp to answer your phone.

Give yourselves time to breathe. If you skip this step or take it too lightly, you may find yourself worn out, frustrated, and desperate to hire

anyone just to have another body in the office.

Even if you find the right person quickly, it is important to have time to introduce and train him or her with care and enthusiasm. Preparing yourself to manage your practice during the transition is a small, but important, step on your journey. Once this step has been completed, you can start looking for the new member of your team.

Look at the Values

The people most likely to contribute to your practice in a positive way are people who share your values. When you value certain qualities, it makes sense to surround yourself with others who value those same qualities.

Your values are those qualities or principles you see as admirable. Your personal values form the foundation of your practice values. Ask yourself what values you want your new employee to bring to the practice. Some values to consider:

- ◆ ***Integrity and Commitment:*** Some values, such as integrity and commitment, are shared by many people. However, do not assume everyone who values integrity or commitment values it in the same way. Think of how integrity and commitment play out in your practice and how you expect an employee to demonstrate integrity and commitment. In some offices, commitment means coming to

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work if you are sick, while in other offices, it means attending continuing education courses on days you are not scheduled to work. Think of specific examples that demonstrate what the values mean to you.

- ♦ **Growth, Open Communication, Work Ethic:** Other values, such as growth, open communication, or a strong work ethic, may be more an expression of your personal values. Do you want team members who are *open* to growth or who *actively seek* it? Is open communication valued in your practice? Are you willing to tolerate gossip or manipulation, or do you want individuals who speak out with sensitivity and courage? What does a strong work ethic mean in your practice? Does it mean seriousness, consistency, and attention to detail? Or could it also take the form of playfulness, bursts of energy, and innovation?
- ♦ **Health:** Some values are important to the profession of dentistry specifically. Since dentistry is a healthcare profession, having employees who value health is essential. The more employees choose health for themselves, the more likely they are to help others choose it.
- ♦ **Sense of Mission:** Having a sense of mission is also important for employees in a dental practice. The profession of dentistry is not a good place for employees who see their work as only a means to a paycheck. The clinical and behavioral aspects of helping people become healthier are too difficult to perform if you do not have an investment in the health of the people you serve. Without a sense of purpose in your work, it is too easy to become discouraged, frustrated, and angry with the people you treat.
- ♦ **Sensitivity, Empathy, Compassion:** Sensitivity, empathy, and compassion also are key qualities for dental professionals. Anyone who comes in contact with a patient must have those qualities, but they are especially important for those employees who work clinically on patients. Unless an employee will work in the office only after office hours, I

would not advise hiring anyone lacking those qualities. There are too many unpredictable situations in dentistry to risk contact between an apprehensive patient and an insensitive staff member.

- ♦ **Entrepreneurial Spirit:** Employees with an entrepreneurial spirit can have great value to a team. Though technically not owners of a dental practice, team members who assume responsibility for and take great pride in the success of a business can have a powerful impact. These team members are more likely to understand the challenges of ownership and to support the risks it involves.

The values I've listed are just a few of the values you will want to consider in your hiring process. Some will be more important in your practice than others, depending on your personal values. There likely will be other values that are particularly important to you. The clearer you are about the qualities you want in a new employee, the better able you will be to recognize them when you hear them expressed or see them demonstrated.

Look at Yourself

Before you communicate your values, examine how they play out in your life. You do not have to live your life by steadfastly adhering to your values before you can hire employees with the same values. However, you should be honest with yourself and with potential employees about your values.

If you value open and honest communication, but sometimes fail to express your opinions as openly as you would like, pay attention to that. If you value commitment, but frequently are torn between your commitment to your practice and your commitment to your family, acknowledge that. The more you understand and accept your own values, and the conflicts in your life that those values create, the better able you will be to articulate what is important to you. The people around you can help you live your values more fully only if you are honest with yourself.

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Consider how the values you have identified mesh with your current employees' values. You may have hired some employees at a time in your life when some of the qualities you have identified were less important to you. Perhaps you are willing to accept less of a desire for growth in an existing employee than you want in the next person you hire. Or perhaps your sense of what growth means has changed over the years to include personal as well as professional growth. It is appropriate to have different expectations of different people in a practice, as long as everyone understands those expectations.

If you want to hire someone with an entrepreneurial spirit, but have people without that quality on your team, think about whether your current team will support the new employee or be threatened by him or her. Do not tell a potential candidate that a certain quality is an important value *in* your practice if you really mean that it is a quality you *want to add* to your practice. Be open about how much of your vision is or is not in place.

Look at Your Current Team

Your current team members can provide useful feedback on how you live the values you are seeking in a new employee. If the environment of your practice encourages open and honest communication, you could have a powerful discussion about how you and your team members live those values. Talk about how you want the team to operate and how the transition can help the team members re-commit to their values. Talk about the challenges of integrating a new personality into the team.

Do you want a new person to help the team grow, or do you want the new person to "fit in?" Talk about how the team sees the success of the new person in relation to the team's success, and

if (and how) the team members will take ownership of the new person's success.

There is also a lot to learn from a person leaving the practice. An exit interview can provide an excellent opportunity for honesty and clarity. The perspective of the employee leaving may be skewed, but there may also be some truth in what that employee has to say. If you listen for the truth instead of the biases, you can learn a lot about your practice. The truth may be hard to hear, but realize that there is always room for improvement.

If the person leaving is a valued employee, you might ask,

"What would it have taken for you to have decided to stay?"

Although you might not have been willing to pay the price requested, you may learn something helpful about yourself, the job, or your practice.

It is not always feasible to get feedback from someone who has chosen to leave or who has been asked to leave. The emotions may be too strong or too painful. Sensitivity and respect on your part are essential if an employee is to leave with dignity. Consider any feedback you get from someone leaving your practice as a gift, even when it's difficult to hear.

Look at the Job You Need To Fill

The hiring process provides an opportunity to redefine the roles of all the employees in the practice. The reorganization that carries the team through the first eight weeks may help you change some of your assumptions about how your practice operates. This reorganization process also frequently helps teams change their perception of the position for which they are hiring.

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For example, perhaps a long-time employee is retiring. The needs of your practice today may be quite different from when you hired her. You have added computers in every treatment room, you pre-schedule all hygiene clients, and you no longer confirm appointments. She has picked up other duties. Consider whether those duties should be passed on to the new employee, or if there is room for improvement in efficiency and effectiveness.

Once you are clear about how you want the new employee to contribute to the practice, ask how the qualities that you have outlined mesh with the role you have identified. Would the kind of person you want to add to your team be attracted to the job you created? Is there room in the new position for growth? Are you asking too much or not enough of the new employee?

Clarify the Opportunities You Have To Offer

If you have had trouble filling a position in the past or retaining an employee in that position, then perhaps the position did not bring fulfillment to the person with the qualities you sought. Ask how the position for which you are hiring will attract someone with the qualities you value and how you could make the position more attractive.

The most highly functioning teams involve everyone in the vision and the values of the practice. These teams surround themselves with people who share their values, with whom they enjoy working, and who enjoy their work. They also involve people who are mission driven, highly motivated, and willing to do whatever has to be done to contribute to the success of the whole practice.

Ask yourself how the position you are hiring for will attract someone with vision and similar values, and how you could make the position more attractive.

Clarify the Abilities You Want

While the values you have outlined help define the overall direction you want your practice to take, the position for which you are hiring has particular requirements, which will also play a role in shaping the practice. It is important to recognize the specific abilities and skills required for this position. For instance, gentleness is an important quality in a hygienist; administrative positions may require skill with computers; and good writing skills are necessary if correspondence is an essential task.

For any new position, consider these qualities:

- ♦ Flexibility
- ♦ Attention to detail
- ♦ Intelligence
- ♦ Ability to communicate clearly
- ♦ Enthusiasm
- ♦ Understanding

Consider other issues as well. How will the new person complement the existing team? If the team is flexible, you may want more structure. If the team members are great at following a plan, you may want someone who enjoys generating new possibilities.

Sometimes in the hiring process, we react to the abilities of the person leaving. We either try to duplicate the person's skills or find someone who in no way resembles that person.

Use this opportunity to figure out what you would want for this position if you could have anything you wanted.

Clarify the Skills You Need

Clarifying the kind of training and education you are willing to provide and prepared to

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invest in the hiring process is important. For example, you may be more willing to hire a hygienist without extensive perio training if you have a more experienced person already working in the practice. If you are losing a highly skilled periodontal therapist and want to ensure that your patients continue to receive the same level of care, you may want to either hire someone with the necessary skills or provide training for a less skilled person.

If you plan to train dental assistants from scratch, you will need a sense of their manual dexterity and ability to learn before hiring them. You may want to know what other new things they have learned recently and their reason for believing they can learn to assist. You may want to expose them to some learning opportunities and see how they perform.

Dentistry can offer a lot to a person who wants to be in a helping profession. If your practice values the input of each person on the team, the practice can offer even more. It can offer the opportunity to shape the future of the organization as well as the person's own future.

Many talented and committed people have been unable to have the impact they would like on the lives of others. There are hygienists who have said they would have left dentistry if they had to continue to be a "prophy machine." If you offer a hygienist the chance to spend the time it takes to help people make healthy choices, your practice may be the one that keeps that hygienist in dentistry or brings him or her back into it.

Think about your open position as a unique opportunity for the right person.

Look for the Candidate

Once you are clear about what you are seeking, you can begin to look for the right person. Skipping the process of values clarification would be a huge mistake, even if you have previously engaged in that process.

Many teams think they know what they want,

but are unable to find the right person. When they take the time to redefine the position and clarify what they want, the right person for the position shows up.

Beginning the Search

Begin by looking around you. Who might you know who fits the profile of the person you want? I know a dentist who was too busy interviewing people responding to her ad to return a call to her computer trainer. It turned out that the computer trainer wanted to talk with the dentist about working in her practice. She became a 30+ year team member!

Another dentist asked a counselor friend if she knew of someone who could facilitate new patient visits in his practice, and she replied, "Yes, me."

Do not dismiss anyone from consideration because you think they are happy in their present job or would want more money than you could offer. People's lives and priorities often change.

Tap into every possible network. Friends, business associates, temporary agencies, patients, family members, the places you shop — they all offer the potential for finding the right person for your practice.

Many people are looking for jobs based on personal values and growth opportunities. When you are clear about what you have to offer a candidate, you will attract someone who wants the unique opportunity you offer.

Running an Ad

If you decide to run an ad, make the ad specific enough to attract candidates appropriate for the job and to screen out those candidates who are not well-suited for the position.

Focus on the qualities you are seeking over the duties of the position. Use language that

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expresses your unique personality, not buzz words.

"Good communicator" could describe almost anyone who knows how to talk and could represent any practice. But asking for someone who can *"listen attentively and communicate with sensitivity and integrity"* is more specific and communicates a powerful message about the practice. As you work through the process of values clarification, you will discover the language that represents your practice. The more specific the ad, the easier the screening process will be.

The ad will set up the screening process. If you are looking for someone who has good written communication skills, ask for a resume and cover letter. If the position is clinical, a resume may not be useful. Instead, ask for a response by phone, so you can immediately identify attitudes about patient care. If you ask for a response by a specific day and time, you can learn about the person's ability to follow directions and pay attention to details.

The Screening Process: The Phone Interview

Be prepared to give the process of a telephone screening the attention it deserves. Do not try to engage in this process while dismissing patients and filling out insurance forms. Set aside time specifically for this purpose. It requires focus, good listening skills, and the ability to represent your practice. It is not a chore to be delegated to whomever is free.

Investing the time to do a thorough screening spares you the agony of sitting through pointless interviews with people who are obviously not appropriate for your practice. Moreover, the telephone screening is a two-way process — the candidates are interviewing you as you are interviewing them. You want to be well-represented.

Remember it is a screening. The goal is to choose the people with whom you want to continue talking and filter out those who are not appropriate for the position. Interviewing takes time

and energy. You want to reserve your time for the best candidates for the job.

If saying "no" to people is difficult for you, remember that it will not get any easier the more you get to know the candidate. You will pay a price for continuing the process with someone you know is not right for the job. The sooner you say "no," the better it will be for both you and the candidate.

The main purpose of the phone screening is to determine whether the candidate has a sense of mission. If you want people who will learn and grow and who will take you beyond where you would go without them, do not continue with those people who simply want to be happy and make a living.

While there is nothing wrong with those goals, it is possible for you to find someone who has more to offer. It is possible for you to have people in your practice who want to make a contribution, who want to make a difference, and who want to shape their own future and the future of the organization. It is not too much to expect.

Ask specific questions that will help you decide whether or not the candidate has a sense of mission.

For example, ask what about the ad prompted the applicant to call and listen for something specific about the language in the ad that attracted that person. Or, ask what the person would enjoy about working in dentistry. Try asking what the person is searching for in a position at this time or what would be an ideal job for that person.

If you ask a candidate what he or she likes about dentistry and the response is, "The people: I'm a people person," then ask what it is about working with people that he or she likes. Being a "people person" may just mean viewing work as a social outlet. There is nothing wrong with that attitude if your business is selling shoes. But dentistry is a helping profession, and it's a profession that needs people who want to help people.

Listen for energy, enthusiasm, and authenticity in communication. If these qualities cannot be

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brought to a phone interview, then they are not likely to be brought to your practice. Don't you want people in your practice who are articulate, confident, and able to connect with a stranger on the phone?

Feel free to ask for evidence that what the candidate reports is true. If the candidate says he or she was attracted by your request for a good communicator, ask what leads him or her to believe he or she is a good communicator. If the response is that personal growth is important, ask what personal growth means to that person and how that person has grown recently. If the candidate says he or she pays attention to details without losing sight of the big picture, ask for an example of a time when the person demonstrated that quality.

Screen for whether a candidate is a good match for the position you are offering. You may really like a particular person, and that person may have a strong sense of mission and be a great communicator. But if you want someone in your practice with strong computer skills, and the candidate's experience in this area is limited, then you probably do not have a good match. If you have a strong desire for someone who works well with children, and the person with whom you are talking says, "I don't mind kids," then you probably do not have a good match.

Recording all phone interviews is a good idea, and recording from a speaker phone is an easy way to do that. Ask permission to record the interview and let the candidate know you will put the call on a speaker phone, but that no one else is in the room. (Sometimes people are uncomfortable talking into a speaker phone if they do not know who is listening.)

Recording allows you to concentrate on the conversation without having to write everything down. It also allows you to share it with the team and listen again with another perspective. You will probably hear something the second time that you did not hear the first time.

The In-Person Interview Process

Over the course of my forty-plus years in dentistry, I have experienced several different interview processes. They look something like this:

1. Ask a few questions and hire a candidate on a trial basis if he or she sounds half-way decent.
2. Have a candidate hang around long enough to see if he or she is well-liked. (This might include chatting with the doctor, having lunch with the team, and working a bit with patients.)
3. Put a candidate through an exhaustive interview process that relies on survival of the fittest — whoever is left standing at the end is the winner.

I suggest an alternative. The hiring process can be efficient and effective if conducted with intention and focus. If performed with preparation and follow-up, it does not have to be dull or tedious.

To make the best use of your time, make sure that every interaction builds on the previous interaction, moves the process forward, and moves you closer to hiring or eliminating the candidate.

Recording the Interviews

Recording all interviews enhances both effectiveness and efficiency. You may feel a bit uncomfortable when you listen to yourself, but it can be a great learning experience. One of my clients was amazed at how many of his own questions he had answered. He thought the candidate answered them, but when he listened to the recording, he realized that all she did was agree with him.

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Inviting others on the team to listen to the recording allows them to hear what you have already learned about the candidate and what you have already told the candidate about your practice. It eliminates the repetition that takes so much time and does not move the process forward.

When you listen to a recorded interview, you can listen for red flags that you might have missed. You can evaluate the candidate more objectively when you are not caught up in the moment. You probably will be surprised about how many questions you have after you listen to a recorded interview or review careful notes. Ask yourself what you **do not yet know** about the candidate instead of what you do know.

Responsive Questions

Prepare questions that allow the candidates to talk about previous experiences, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. Use the information you learned in the phone screening to make the questions more relevant. Some examples:

"You mentioned on the phone that you want a career, not just a job. Can you tell me a little about what that means to you?"

"You described yourself as healthy. What do you believe contributes to health?"

"You talked about how much you enjoyed your first job in dentistry. Can you tell me what you liked most about it?"

Using language from the phone interview will help the candidates feel at ease.

Do not hesitate to let the candidates know when you agree with them when appropriate. But do not make assumptions about what they are saying and do not complete the interview for them. Take as long as you need; it's not necessary to get all the answers in one sitting. The primary goal should be to determine whether to proceed to the next step with each person.

Based on what the candidate has shared, you can create follow-up questions to move the process forward. You can turn the candidate's statements into questions that allow you to learn more about that candidate. The following represents elements of a conversation you might have with someone applying for a position.

- ♦ If she says the office from which she came was a terrible place to work, respond sympathetically. Then raise the question of what steps she took to change the situation.
- ♦ If he says he wants to work in a practice that is about caring for patients and not all about money, recognize his commitment to caring for patients. Then ask what would lead him to believe a practice was "all about money." Ask how he feels about the cost in dentistry.
- ♦ If she says she loves the idea of teamwork, ask her what that means to her, and how she deals with conflict with someone on a team. Ask what she would do if she had a conflict with the doctor.
- ♦ If he says he learns quickly, follow up with questions about how he learns best and what he knows about his learning style.

If you give people the opportunity to reveal themselves, you will learn everything you need to know. Following up at each interaction allows the candidates to feel heard and to tell you what they want you to know about them.

People want to work in a place where they are appreciated for who they really are. Of course, the possibility of dishonesty exists, but that is more likely to occur when people are asked questions that have an obvious "right" answer.

Asking open-ended, focused questions based on each candidate's comments will provide you with accurate and relevant information.

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This process requires more preparation than chatting or sticking to a formulaic set of questions, but it is not difficult. You may be surprised at how easily you form questions that provide you with the specific information you need to make a good choice.

Observation and Experiential Process

If you think a candidate has potential, consider asking him or her to spend time in the practice while you are seeing patients to "interview the practice." This process is different from a day of observation. It is an active, rather than passive process.

Hand the candidates a notebook and ask them to take notes and learn everything they would want to know to determine if they would like to work in your practice. Give them permission to ask questions of anyone and to make note of any questions they do not want to ask in front of patients, so they can ask you later.

Expect the candidates to have questions, but prepare some of your own as well. Examples included questions about what they thought about your practice, how it is different from other practices they have experienced, either as an employee or as a patient. Ask what they liked, what they were curious about, and what suggestions they might have for you.

If they comment that you spend a lot of time talking to patients, ask about their thoughts on the conversations they heard, and how those conversations were different from conversations they've heard in other practices.

Look for curiosity, enthusiasm, and the ability to distinguish some of the qualities that make your practice special.

If you hear what you want to hear, a working interview is the next step, even if difficult to arrange. It simply does not make sense to agree to work with someone without some idea of the person's ability to function in your practice when

you are seeing patients. Consider working with the candidate on the computer, in the laboratory, or wherever it takes to give you a sense of the person's skills. If the candidate is a hygienist or experienced dental assistant, you will certainly want to work with the person clinically before hiring him or her.

An effective working interview requires the availability of someone to observe the process. For example, turning a hygienist loose on your patients does not serve any purpose unless someone can take the time to observe the interaction. Arrange for someone to observe and talk with the candidate about the experience.

Reference Check

Checking the candidate's references at any time in the process may be appropriate. If you have not done so by now, this is the time. While the information from previous employers may not be reliable, checking references is nonetheless a necessary precaution.

I remember working with a dental assistant with whom I was impressed because she was always the first one in the office every morning. When she was caught sniffing Nitrous one morning we checked with her previous employer and learned that she had been let go from his office for that reason.

The chance of finding out something surprising is slim, but if you do learn something unexpected, it could be important in your hiring decision. More likely, checking references will provide a confirmation of what you already know about the candidate.

Reasonable Expectations

We have outlined how to give yourself the space to search for a new employee, how to clarify what you want, how to advertise for the

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position, how to ask the questions, and how to test for what you want. If you are not sure about whether to hire a particular candidate after going through this entire process, then do not make a commitment to hire that person.

If you cannot hire with enthusiasm, your ability to support the new employee will be compromised. Instead, continue your search for a more appropriate match.

This process is not designed to find you the perfect employee. There is no such thing. There are only people who can or cannot help you achieve what you want to achieve in your practice. And what you want to achieve will change over time.

When I hear practices talk about a former employee as a "mistake," I wonder if that is true, or if that person was a reflection of the development of the practice at the time that employee was hired.

If your work is an expression of what you like best about yourself, you have a right to share that work with like-minded people who share your values and whose company you enjoy. To contribute mutually to each other's success is a possible and worthwhile goal. I encourage you to settle for nothing less than team members you treasure.

Classic & Current Resources

My work is influenced and informed by the wisdom of past as well as emerging new thinking. The following is a list of some of the sources I referred to while writing this issue of *Practice Renewal*:

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A Hiring Map

1. What are the qualities you see as *essential* to being a part of the team in your practice? What are some desirable qualities you would like to add to your team?
2. If you are in the hiring process now, or if you had to hire someone soon, how would you organize yourselves for two months in order to work effectively with one fewer team member? What resources would you tap into? How could you begin now to develop resources to have at your disposal?
3. Review the most recent hiring process in your practice. How did each interaction contribute to the process? How could you have used your time more efficiently and effectively? What would you have liked to have learned earlier in the process?
4. Every office has qualities that make it a desirable place to work and some that make it a difficult place to work. If a friend asked you confidentially to talk about the drawbacks to working in your practice, what would you tell him or her? What could you begin to do now to make those issues less problematic?
5. Role play an interview with a fellow team member as if he or she were currently applying for a job in your practice. Begin with a broad question, such as, "What are you hoping to find in a position at this time in your life? How would you describe your ideal job?" As a learning experience, make a question out of his or her responses, and continue to do so for as long as you can before asking a different question. What did you learn about him or her? What did you learn about yourself?
6. What is unique about the opportunity your practice offers? If you met a person who you would love to have on your team, what would you tell that person about your practice to persuade him/her to join your team?