Managing an ambulatory surgery center (ASC) entails more than delivering patient care and keeping the facility well equipped and supplied. It also means managing the people who work there—a delicate proposition for results-oriented administrators who may find themselves in charge of employees with a wide range of technical and social skills.

Monica Ziegler tells a story from her own experience as administrator at Physicians Surgical Center in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, that illustrates the importance of motivation.

The new receptionist was a young woman with an attitude that seemed designed to offend customers. Her telephone voice sounded flat and bored: “She sounded like she didn’t really give a rip about her job,” Ziegler says. So Ziegler applied training, encouragement, patience, and practice. Before long, she recalls, the young woman was so popular that callers asked for her personally, and some patients arrived in person to pay their bills just so they could visit with their new friend.

Ziegler’s rule in managing people is, “Invest in them, believe in them, and they will meet your expectations.” That is true, she adds, whether those expectations are high or low.

Or to put it another way: “How we lead is how they will follow.”

Even a great leader, however, may have to supervise people with a variety of personalities and motivations. Money is not the best motivator, Ziegler notes, citing classic management theories. But what is? “Ask them what motivates them,” Ziegler advises.

Because Ziegler places a high priority on human resources, Physicians Surgical Center quickly became a popular place after opening in August 2005. The three operating rooms and one procedure room have exceeded expectations in both utilization and profits, she says.

“The staff members are key to our success,” Ziegler says.

Accentuate the positive

Ziegler discussed her employee management strategies at the recent ASC Association conference in San Antonio, Texas, where a room full of notetakers showed how critical ASC managers consider the topic.

Ziegler stressed the positive approach and the importance of investing in employees’ success.

“Relationships are like bank accounts,” she says. “You can’t take out what you don’t put in.”

One good investment, she says, is public praise. When someone does an especially good job, write a letter thanking them and don’t just put it in their file.

“Send it to their home, where it will have the biggest impact,” she advises.

When an employee is not a good match

Even the best efforts sometimes fail. An employee may simply not be a good match for the job. That is when managers need to know how to administer discipline and yes, sometimes to fire an employee when all else fails.

That is where an expert like Raleigh (Sandy) Seay, Jr, PhD, can help. Seay, a management consultant, joined Ziegler at the conference to explain how to avoid legal
and administrative hassles and to maintain both morale and safety in workplace disputes.

Seay also advocates focusing on the positive to the greatest extent possible. “If you’ve got good material, work with it,” he advises.

Seay says most employees want to do a good job. “It’s the 10% or so who cause all the trouble and take all of our time.”

His recommendations for correcting bad behavior are in the sidebar.

Document, document, document

The most important principle in disciplining employees, Seay says, is that, legally, the burden of proof is on the employer, and to meet that burden requires detailed documentation.

“The most critical shortcoming for management,” he says, “is we forget to document until it’s too late.”

Penalties can include back wages, fines, reinstatement of dismissed employees, and bad publicity.

Proper documentation can avert a finding of discrimination or other infraction of employment law; without it, an employer can be found guilty even if the claim is without substance.

The disciplinary process should begin with a written warning. Place a copy in the personnel file and give a copy to the employee. The employee does not have to sign it for it to be valid, Seay notes. The warning should specify facts and dates and the relevant rule or policy that was violated.

“Be specific,” he says. “Writing ‘excessive absenteeism’ is not enough.”

After giving the warning to the employee, explain that it provides an opportunity to improve, but if there is no improvement within a certain time period, further disciplinary action will follow.

In some cases, Seay notes, the manager should not state the exact type of discipline to preserve flexibility, but there are other times when the employee needs to know the job is on the line.

When all else fails

“Once you’ve decided an employee should be dismissed, it’s best to move ahead with the dismissal, take the heat of the moment, and let the healing process begin,” Seay advises. “Otherwise, it will be worse at the end than it was at the beginning.”

But firing someone is unpleasant, and most employers delay the moment as long as possible, hoping for improvement despite evidence that the situation is only getting worse.

To minimize the pain, Seay offers these suggestions:

• Dismiss at the end of the day. If you fire in the morning, the employee has all day to get angry and possibly return and get violent. Friday afternoon is the best time, Seay says: “Generally, the employee will simmer down over a couple of days.”
• Make the dismissal meeting private but have one witness.
• Anticipate beforehand how the employee will react and make security arrangements if that seems appropriate.
• Keep the meeting short and do not argue. There is no requirement to give a specific reason for dismissal. Say the company has made the decision, and today is the last day of employment.
• Escort the employee out of the building.
• There is no requirement for severance pay and, in many states, no requirement to pay for unused vacation.
• Do not offer a reference; if the dismissal is challenged, you may have to explain your offer.
• In most cases, do not allow the employee to resign as an alternative; this may be considered a “constructive discharge” and subject to challenge.
• Document the event.

As Seay reminded the ASC managers, there is little margin for error in employee discipline.
“Agencies that enforce employment regulations operate under a unique and unusual enforcement policy that the burden of proof is on the employer. This means you must be able to prove and document the fact that your personnel actions are correct, proper, and in compliance with the regulations.”

—Paula DeJohn

Paula DeJohn is a freelance writer in Denver.

Correcting bad behavior

Recommendations from Raleigh (Sandy) Seay, Jr, PhD:
- Never criticize an employee in front of others.
- Never reprimand an employee when tempers are high; wait until you and they are calmer.
- Listen to the employee’s point of view; it reduces defensiveness and may provide valuable information.
- Share the blame if necessary; inadequate training might be the cause.
- Discuss the problem rather than the employee.
- Explain why, as well as how, you expect behavior to change.
- Agree on how to improve the situation.
- End the interview “on a high note” with encouragement and optimism.
- There is one exception: If you are concerned about safety, “move quickly.”