

Sandy Roth's

Communique!

Unique and Challenging Concepts from ProSynergy Dental Communications

#151: Red Flags

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Red Flags

As many of you know, we spend a fair amount of time helping our clients learn how to hire, train and integrate new team members. It seems no matter where I go, hiring and training are major issues. And no wonder. Most dentists have no expertise in human resource matters and cannot afford to hire an HR organization to guide them in hiring. So, most just plug in an ad, muddle through an interview and hope for the best.

Occasionally, they are lucky. Too often, they are disappointed. New employees are frequently poorly placed, inadequately trained and clueless about expectations. Certainly, this is a recipe for disaster. Our Hiring Resources can help you learn more about how to hire effectively. But today, I'd like to address the single issue of red flags.

I was prompted to address this issue by a conversation I had with a client earlier this week. She and I have been working together on hiring, and she has become quite skilled at many aspects of hiring. As we were debriefing

about a specific interview she mentioned something in passing that caught my attention.

As it happened, a highly qualified candidate for chairside assistant was spending a working day in the office. She was looking for a new position because her current employer was entering a retirement phase and cutting back to just a few days each week.

At one point, the candidate complimented the dentist on her clinical skills. Then, she went on to describe, in some detail, her concerns about the clinical skills of her current employer, a dentist known to the interviewing dentist. Because my client was flattered by the candidate's comments, she did not focus on the disparaging remarks made about the current employer.

When my client referred to the comments made by the candidate, she was doing so to highlight her clinical awareness. Indeed, one of the characteristics she desired was a strong clinical background and good skills. But the comments raised a red flag for me.

What is a red flag? It is a warning signal. It is

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a indicator that there is something more to learn or something more to address. Red flags aren't STOP signs; they are PAUSE AND FIND OUT MORE signs. They aren't in and of themselves a reason to eliminate a candidate, although when they are addressed, a candidate might respond in a way that would cause you to eliminate her.

Red flags often sneak into a conversation and are often not overt or blatant. A red flag can be inserted as an afterthought rather than as a primary response to a question. For this reason, the interviewer must be an astute listener and maintain an awareness of peripheral comments and side issues. Once a red flag is identified, it must be addressed either at the time or at a subsequent event. When you have become skilled at hearing and identifying red flags, you will most likely address them in the moment, but initially, you may want some time to reflect and gather your thoughts before proceeding.

I find that many people hear red flags when they are interviewing and do one of two things: use it as an eliminator and invalidate the candidate or justify it by assuming what the comment really represents. "She probably meant..." or "I suppose she thought that..." are the kinds of comments that indicate that the interviewer heard the red flag but never addressed it. This is a serious oversight. When you fail to address a red flag, you miss an important opportunity to learn something significant about the candidate.

What was the red flag in this case? When I heard the report from the dentist, my concern was that this candidate lacked the ability to use discretion with private information about others. It was not the interviewing dentist's business to know about the clinical skills of her current employer and she had no right to pass that information on. It had nothing to do with the interview or her qualifications.

Because a red flag is a PAUSE rather than a STOP signal, we don't yet know whether the candidate is simply being careless or naive about this type of sensitive information or whether she is a mean-spirited gossip....or something in between. That is why the red flag, once identified, must be addressed.

The hiring dentist must know what she would experience if the candidate were to become an employee. And ultimately, the candidate must know what the dentist considers proper protocol and behavior when handling sensitive information about patients, co-workers and her employer. Most employees are privy to a substantial amount of information that is proprietary: financial data about the business, medical and dental information as well as financial information about patients, and informally gathered information about the employer and co-workers. There are proper protocols about handling this information, and employers must believe that they can trust staff with each of these elements.

How might this be raised with this candidate.

I believe it is important to be clear and direct with one's concern while quickly returning the issue to the candidate for a response. In this case, it might go something like this:

“Susan, I'm concerned about something you mentioned in passing the other day when you were in the office. You shared with me some quite specific information about Dr. So-and-so's clinical skills. Can you tell me about how you determine what is okay to pass on about others and what should be kept private?”

Then, you sit respectfully and listen. You do not comment or contribute anything farther. You simply listen. Indeed, the candidate may feel like she is on the hot seat, but it is her seat, not yours. It is better to understand this now than have a huge problem when she is your employee.

As you listen, you will get to learn at least two things, both of which are very important. The first, of course, is the answer to the question you asked. You will get to hear how this person exercises judgment about such matters. You might be persuaded by what you hear or you may find the response unsatisfactory. But the candidate is the one who is representing herself. You aren't making it up or making excuses on her behalf.

The second thing you will get to learn is how the candidate responds to conflict and reacts to an awkward and difficult situation. Defensiveness is difficult to discover under other

circumstances. “Are you defensive?” “No.” doesn't get to the truth of a person's style, but addressing a red flag is a real-life opportunity to experience a potential employee under one of the most challenging of circumstances.

The types of red flags I have heard include cynicism, skepticism, judgment, immaturity, lack of sensitivity, and “it's not my job” frame of mind, pettiness and similar mindsets. I find it interesting that if you let a person define him or herself for you, he or she will actually do so. All you need do is learn how to ask good questions, how to listen attentively to everything you hear, how to identify things that cause you concern when you hear them and how to address them fairly.

Here's another example. A favorite, but mostly ineffective, interview question is, “What type of feedback works best for you?” The type of response one often hears is “I want people to be direct with me. If I'm not doing something right, tell me directly.” Well, while that may be the “right” answer, it may not be accurate in practice. In fact, many people have trouble with direct feedback, even while they say they prefer it. Raising a red flag with a candidate will create a real-life experience for you to learn how a person does in fact deal with direct feedback.

What type of answer might you want to hear to the question about confidentiality? I'd love “You know, you're absolutely right. That was inappropriate. Thanks for calling me on that!”