Can the Honeymoon Last? How to Keep an Executive Team Alive and Kicking

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In today's healthcare arena, the rising cost of doing business, coupled with the stress of responsibilities and call schedules, has led an increasing number of doctors to come together to form group practices. From the process you use to recruit new doctors to the ongoing maintenance of a healthy team, there are a number of key strategies that can help you avoid partnership pitfalls and form an executive team that will be effective, profitable, and enjoyable.

Key words: Partners; executive team; team; executive retreat; mission statement.

In today's healthcare arena, the rising cost of doing business, coupled with the stress of responsibilities and call schedules, has led an increasing number of doctors to come together to form group practices. For many doctors, this has been a good solution yielding multiple benefits and little downside. Unfortunately, most doctors have found that expanding to a group has catapulted their practice into a tumultuous and even catastrophic maze of stressful experiences.

Would you say marriage is difficult? Try entering into happily-ever-after with two or more doctors, and see what the term "relationship issues"* really *means!

Remember the old adage about too many cooks in the kitchen? We've seen practices that became paralyzed because partners couldn't find a way to agree on the simplest of decisions.

Would you say marriage is difficult? Try entering into happily-ever-after with two or more doctors, and see what the term "relationship issues" *really* means!

Do you think merging two families together has its challenges? Well, merging two practices has all of the same problems. Sibling rivalry and territorial disputes come in all shapes and sizes.

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So how do you avoid partnership pitfalls and form an executive team that will be effective, profitable, and enjoyable? Here are a few tips that have worked well for our clients.

THE SEARCH IS ON

The typical practice puts an ad in association journals and at Internet sites, and then registers with a recruiting firm. Resumes roll in, but they are less than exciting. The practice gets desperate and finally settles for second best. Try this instead:

Step 1

Make a list of the personality traits of each of your current partners. On a scale of 1 to 10, rate each other according to the degree to which each of you is, for example, people-oriented or task-oriented; quiet and conflict-averse or loud and dramatic; and slow and meticulous or fast-paced and spontaneous. Summarize your list, and this becomes your "partner personality profile" (PPP).

Once you have generated your PPP, ask yourself some key questions like:

- What are the personality traits that we are lacking that we might want someone to provide?
- What are the personality traits that we all share that we want to make certain are shared by our next partner?
- What are the personality traits that we all want to avoid no matter what?

Take the answers to these questions, and create a one-paragraph description of your perfect partner.

Step 2

Revise your ad to include the description you've created. The ad will be longer and cost more. Don't be cheap here; consider the cost of continually interviewing poor candidates.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Into your conference room walks the candidate you've been dreaming of. Well dressed, good carriage, she strides into the room confident and poised. You look at her CV and discover that you are talking to a well-credentialed, published, experienced, board-certified superstar. You ask some key questions and discover that she is willing to relocate, looking for a partnership arrangement, and has flexible call availability. You are starting to hyperventilate.

It's not just that this candidate fits your requirements . . . you actually *like* this person. She is pleasant, grounded in ethics that match your own, has skills that take over where yours' leave off, and is a proven work horse. You meet her spouse and kids, and they are all simply wonderful. You go out to dinner and find yourself laughing and enjoying your evening.

This is someone you could live with happily ever after.

Step 1

Stop, take a deep breath, and ask yourself a very important question: "Am I talking myself into this person or is this really someone I like?"

Step 2

Check your PPP, and make sure that this candidate is a good match. Be analytical. If there are any traits that you were looking for that you haven't seen yet, devise a scenario that will allow you to assess them and talk them out with your candidate. You will be able to see the traits in action if you ask the right questions.

Step 3

Let your key staff members interview the candidate. Agree in advance about the questions that will be asked. Be sure to get their feedback, and take it seriously. They will see things that you might miss. Remember, they have an entirely different perspective on your practice than you do, and their input will be important here.

Step 4

Have an objective third party interview your candidate. Give that person your PPP and your list of requirements, and ask him to assess your candidate for the degree to which he perceives a match.

Step 5

Have a really good attorney draw up your contractual agreements.

Step 6

Say "I DO" and cut the cake!

THE HONEYMOON PHASE

It is critically important that you start your partnership off on the right foot, or you'll be behind the 8-ball for the duration. There are three steps to ensuring that the beginning of your relationship serves as a launch pad for a long and productive partnership.

Step 1

Hold an executive retreat. I can't stress this enough. The worst possible move you can make is to bring a new partner into your practice before you've taken the time to sit down in a room for two days and talk. Admittedly, your new "partner" will likely be an associate before she is able to buy in, but now is the time to get everyone on the same page. You will find a more rapid buy-in and a smoother transition if you start out your relationship this way.

It is critically important that you plan time during your retreat to invite an open and unthreatening discussion in order to clear up any misunderstandings or long-standing resentments.

Get coverage, and sequester yourselves in a good hotel for the weekend. Talk about your vision, and develop a mission statement for your partnership. Even if you already have a mission statement for your practice, you need one for your executive team. Your partner mission statement should be meaningful to all of you and should incorporate the vision of all partners inclusively.

Once you have your mission statement, your short-term and long-term goals come straight from that. Get your goals listed, and then develop a step-by-step plan of action for the attainment of those goals. Talk about personal and professional barriers to your success, and help each other to break through those barriers.

Determine the best methods for your team to go about making future decisions. Talk about how each of you typically goes about making decisions, and then find a planned decision format that will work effectively for all of you. This will save you many months of agony!

In any existing team, there is always "unfinished business" among existing partners that is getting in the way of a smooth transition to the new partnership. It is critically important that you plan time during your retreat to invite an open and unthreatening discussion in order to clear up any misunderstandings or long-standing resentments. This is the time to start fresh, so you don't want anything lurking underneath. Don't be concerned about airing "dirty laundry" in front of your new associate. You are setting an important precedent that will serve all of you well in the future—one in which you talk openly and honestly and resolve your issues candidly and fairly.

At the end of your retreat, generate a next-step list so that every partner knows how to carry forward the triumphs of your weekend.

Step 2

Hold a full-practice team-enhancement session. This will allow you to quickly incorporate your new doctor into your existing practice and ensure that your staff embraces the change. Depending on the size of your practice, you can do this as a one- or two-day off-site retreat. The purpose of this meeting is to help everyone to develop a level of comfort with, and respect for, your new associate before launching into the work setting.

Help everyone to meet your new associate before launching into the work setting.

Plan that you will all learn something new together so that there is a sense of equality among new and older members of your practice. Make a plan about how you are going to work together to enhance your practice. Talk about the stress that will be relieved for all of you because of the new addition to the practice. Remember to acknowledge the additional work and initial stress that will be placed on your staff as they learn the new doctor's protocols and methods. Allow staff members to offer suggestions for how to best alter existing processes. The key here is to work together to create your future.

Step 3

Be sure to follow through. Hold 15-minute, weekly follow-up meetings for three months. During each meeting, review something that you agreed on in your team-enhancement session. Don't let this slip. This is the foundation of consistency.

KEEP THE FIRES BURNING

All relationships burnout if you fail to fan the flames. Your executive team needs your attention if it is to grow and develop.

Step 1

Never take anything for granted. Check in with your partners to make sure that all promises are being kept and that no toes have been inadvertently stepped on. Make certain to offer positive feedback on a regular basis so everyone knows they are appreciated and recognized.

Step 2

Keep laughing. Find a way to enjoy each others' company outside of the workplace. The more you like being together, the more likely you'll be to focus on getting your partnership stronger.

Step 3

Confront problems as they occur. This is the biggest challenge in keeping partnerships strong. No matter what it takes, find the time to talk things out until they are finished for all parties.

Step 4

Hold monthly executive team meetings. Remember to use your planned decision format at every meeting so that you get through decision making swiftly. Review your partner mission statement and update your plan of action to make sure that every partner is doing his or her fair share of participating in the growth of the practice.

Step 5

Shake up your call schedule. Typically, the job of scheduling is given to the newest associate in the practice. Make sure you give that individual enough leeway to try new combinations of days, weekends, etc. This is a key area where resentments can build, so make certain that you check in with each other to ensure that this is being handled in an efficient and fair manner for everyone involved.

Step 6

Always, always, always remember: *you are a team*. Above all, you must cover each others' backs, and remember that everything you say and do will reflect on your partners. You are not alone anymore.

YOUR ANNIVERSARY

Every year on the anniversary of your initial executive retreat, do it again. Two days is a small investment to set up a year of success. Follow the same steps as your initial retreat: renew your commitment to each other and your partner mission, set new goals for the year, develop a new plan of action, and clear any unfinished business.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There is nothing more rewarding than having a team of colleagues with whom you can share your passion and your responsibilities. Your executive team is an entity unto itself. If you treat it with care and respect, it will carry you to new levels of success, help you to build a legacy of good care for your patients, and provide you with the security of working with people you trust and the joy of working with people you call "friends." ■