Recognise, reward, retain

Mark Topley explains how to build loyalty in your dental team

I have been a judge for the Private Dentistry Awards for more than a decade now. Every year, I read submissions from practices across the UK, and I can tell you this: the ones that consistently win aren't necessarily the most profitable or the most clinically advanced. They're the practices where you can feel the loyalty and engagement of the team through the pages. You can't fake that. And increasingly, you can't succeed without it. Loyalty isn't bought. It's built.

In private practice, where you're already competing on salaries, benefits and working conditions, the differentiator isn't what you pay. It's whether your team would choose to stay during difficult times, recommend you to talented friends and remain genuinely engaged year after year.

That kind of loyalty – the kind that weathers associate turnover, competitive offers from corporates, and the inevitable challenges of running a business – doesn't come from another pay rise or an extra day's holiday. It comes from something deeper.

But first, let's be clear about what we're building. Many practices describe themselves as 'a family', and I understand the sentiment. You want that warmth, that sense of belonging, that commitment to each other. But families can be dysfunctional. The language of family can excuse poor boundaries, manipulate people into accepting less than they deserve, or create guilt when someone needs to prioritise their actual family.

Be intentional. Build the best aspects of family – genuine care, mutual support, celebrating together – while maintaining professional boundaries and clear expectations. That's the foundation. Now let's talk about how recognition, reward and retention work together to create genuine loyalty.



Mark Topley

Mark is a leadership and team performance consultant working with dental practice owners and senior leaders. He helps people create clarity, set clear standards, and build real accountability so teams perform well without constant chasing.

RECOGNISE: THE DAILY PRACTICE OF BEING SEEN

Recognition isn't an annual appraisal or employee of the month. It's the consistent practice of noticing and acknowledging behaviour that reflects your values.

This is where many practices lose their employed team. Your dental nurses, hygienists and reception staff aren't necessarily motivated by the same things that drive your associates. They're not building a patient list or developing their clinical reputation. They need something else: to know their work matters and to feel valued for their contribution.

When your dental nurse anticipates exactly what you need during a complex procedure, mention it. When reception handles a difficult patient with grace, acknowledge it. When someone stays late to support a colleague, thank them specifically for that choice.

The power of recognition multiplies when it's tied to clear values. If one of your practice values is 'we support each other', catch people doing exactly that and name it: 'That's exactly the kind of teamwork we value here'. You're not just thanking them, you're reinforcing what good looks like.

For associates, recognition takes a different form. They need acknowledgment of their clinical excellence, respect for their professional judgment, and appreciation of the relationships they build with patients. An associate who feels their expertise is valued and their autonomy respected is far more likely to stay than one who's simply tolerated as a producer of revenue.

Recognition costs nothing, but the absence of it costs everything. When people feel invisible, they leave. Replacing them costs your practice between £10,000 and £30,000 per person, plus the disruption to your team and patient experience.

REWARD: BEYOND THE PAYSLIP

Recognition tells people they matter. Reward shows you mean it.

Yes, competitive financial reward matters. You can't build loyalty on goodwill alone. But once you're paying fairly – and in private practice, you probably are – the meaningful rewards become less about money and more about growth, autonomy and opportunity.

For your employed team, reward means investment in its development. It means funded training, clear progression paths and opportunities to take on more responsibility. It means flexibility when they need it and genuine care about their wellbeing. It means profit-sharing or bonuses tied to practice success, so they benefit when the practice thrives.

Your practice manager who's been with you for eight years isn't staying for



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£2,000 more elsewhere. They're staying because they've built something here, because you trust their judgment, because they have autonomy and influence. That's reward.

For associates, the reward equation differs. They're motivated by clinical autonomy – freedom to treat their patients as they see fit without interference. They want income aligned with productivity, the ability to build their reputation, and professional respect from the practice owner and team. Security matters too: knowing their list is protected, that they'll be supported with materials and equipment, that the practice isn't going to be sold from under them.

Corporates can outspend you on base salary. They can't give your associates the personal relationship with an owner who respects their expertise. They can't give your employed team the family-without-dysfunction warmth of a practice where they're known and valued as individuals.

That's your advantage. Use it.

RETAIN: THE COMPOUND EFFECT OF GETTING IT RIGHT

Recognition and reward don't exist separately. They're interconnected practices that, done consistently, create the kind of loyalty that transforms your practice.

When your team stays through difficult periods – when an associate leaves unexpectedly, when you're short-staffed, when there's a complaint or a tough day – that's loyalty. When they recommend talented friends to work with you, that's loyalty. When they're still genuinely engaged five, 10, 15 years in, that's loyalty.

You can't manufacture that. You build it through hundreds of small decisions that show your team they matter.

This is where the 'family' metaphor becomes useful again. The best families show up for each other. They assume positive intent. They forgive mistakes and help each other learn. They celebrate successes and support through challenges. They have difficult conversations when needed, but with care and respect.

That's the culture that creates retention. Not because people can't leave, but because they don't want to.

The practices that aren't struggling with retention right now have created environments where:

- People understand the practice's purpose and feel part of something worthwhile
- Values are clear and consistently modelled
- Good work is noticed and appreciated regularly
- People's strengths are recognised and developed
- Both associates and employed team feel respected for their different contributions
- Mistakes are learning opportunities, not reasons for blame or fear.

This isn't the soft approach. It's a rigorously strategic one supported by the data. Every time someone leaves, you lose productivity, expertise, patient relationships and team morale. You spend months recruiting and onboarding their replacement. You risk losing the patients who were loyal to them. You create uncertainty in your remaining team.

The business case for loyalty is overwhelming. But here's the better reason: work is a huge part of people's lives. Creating a place where they feel valued, where they do meaningful work, where they're genuinely glad to show up – that's worth doing for its own sake.