Recognise to retain

Mark Topley explains how appreciation fuels your dental team's success

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If you are still scratching your head and wondering why you're struggling to recruit and retain good people, you probably have a culture problem masquerading as a recruitment problem.

I know that's not what you want to hear. It would be easier if this was simply about not paying enough, or the post-pandemic shift in working patterns, or any of the other external factors we like to blame. But the research tells a different story.

Studies by Glassdoor show that across all income levels, the top predictor of workplace satisfaction isn't pay. It's the culture and values of the organisation. Marcus Buckingham's 2022 research found that the most powerful predictor of whether someone stays in their job is whether they get to do what they're good at and love doing every single day.

Your people want to feel valued. They want to know their work matters. And most practices are getting this spectacularly wrong.

Why most recognition programmes fail

Let me guess: you've tried an 'employee of the month' scheme – maybe you still have one running – and either it's become a box-ticking exercise that everyone secretly resents, or it quietly died and nobody seemed to notice.

Here's why: employee of the month programmes are toxic.

They turn recognition into a zero-sum game where only one person wins and everyone else loses. They create artificial competition in a team that should be collaborating. They force you to choose between people who might all be doing brilliant work, just in different ways.

Worst of all, they separate out individual performance from the behaviours that actually build great culture. You end up rewarding whoever happened to do the most this month, rather than the people who consistently demonstrate your values.

Recognition that actually works

The alternative is simpler and far more powerful: recognise behaviour that reflects your culture, give credit where it's due, and celebrate everyone who shows up and contributes.

This starts with clarity. What are your practice's values? Not the generic ones that could apply to any dental practice in the country, but the specific behaviours that make your practice yours. If you can't articulate what good looks like, you can't recognise it when you see it.

Once you know what you stand for, recognition becomes straightforward: catch people demonstrating those values, and acknowledge it.

This doesn't need to be complicated or expensive. It needs to be regular, specific and genuine:

- When someone stays late to support a colleague, mention it
- When someone handles a difficult patient with grace, thank them
- When the team pulls together during a hectic day, acknowledge it at the huddle the next morning
- When someone makes a suggestion that improves the patient experience, implement it and credit them.

The power isn't in grand gestures. It's in the cumulative effect of feeling seen and appreciated week after week.

The bigger picture

Recognition isn't a standalone strategy. It's part of how you create a place where people genuinely want to work.

Think of it this way: recruitment challenges are symptoms. The disease is usually poor leadership, unclear purpose, weak culture – or all three. When practices focus only on perks and pay rises, they're treating symptoms while the underlying condition worsens.

The practices that aren't struggling with retention right now aren't necessarily paying more. They've just created environments where people understand the practice's purpose, values are consistently modelled, good work is noticed, strengths are developed, and mistakes are learning opportunities.

Recognition is the daily manifestation of these principles. It's how your values move from a poster on the wall to lived experience.

Recognition is powerful, but it's just the beginning. If you want to build a practice where retention isn't a problem because nobody wants to leave, you need a more comprehensive approach.

Mark is offering complimentary strategy sessions to help you tackle retention properly. Visit **great-boss.com** to book.



Where to start

1. Get clear on your values. Write down three to five demonstrable behaviours that represent your practice at its best
2. Make it routine. Build recognition into your team meetings, huddles, or end-of-day catch-ups
3. Be specific. 'Great job' means nothing. 'Thank you for taking time to explain the treatment plan to Mrs Jones so thoroughly – that's exactly how we want patients to feel cared for' means everything
4. Look wide, not just high. Don't only recognise the star performers. Recognise the consistent contributors, the supporters, the people who make everyone else's job easier
5. Ask your team. Who should we be recognising? What makes someone feel appreciated here? You might be surprised by the answers.