

Dear Mary Pat: Should a Medical Office Manager Eat Lunch With the Staff?

☒ A reader recently posed the question “Should a medical office manager eat lunch with the staff?” This question is more complex than one might originally think, and a lot of psychology actually plays into the answer. Here are some guidelines to help managers find the right times to eat lunch with the staff.

A manager should follow the rules set for the staff. If the rules say that lunch is to be eaten in the break room and not at desks, then the office manager should not hold her/himself above the rules and eat lunch at her/his desk because it is more convenient or relaxing.

The manager should appear in the lunchroom periodically to eat lunch as the staff likes to see the manager casually once in awhile and it’s a good chance to catch up with what everyone is talking about. It’s not good to eat with the staff in the break room too often, as sometimes they can’t relax or be natural or enjoy their lunch if they feel you are there watching them or listening to their conversation.

As to eating lunch outside the practice with the staff, choose your occasions wisely. I think it is acceptable to take the staff to lunch one-on-one for their birthday or anniversary as long as you take EVERYONE throughout the year, but typically it would only be appropriate to go out with all the staff for a practice occasion. You can take a team of managers or supervisors that report to you out for a lunch meeting or a special occasion.

If you go to lunch with one employee regularly, you can be sure the rest of the staff is thinking that your lunch buddy

has special information that they don't. Employees will worry about your ability to keep information confidential if you seem to be more friendly with some employees than you are with others. Some employees will even intimate that they have a closer relationship with you than they actually do.

If you're tired of eating alone, connect with other practice managers in the area and use the time to compare notes on issues without divulging any proprietary practice information, or just to connect on a personal level.

Managers of smaller practices might not have these kinds of decisions to make as their staff lunch breaks are separated, or the culture is such that everyone always eats together. I once worked with a practice many years ago where the staff cooked lunch most days for the physicians (2) and the staff (3) – it was both surprising and charming!

If you have any management questions you'd like me to answer, send an email with your question to marypatwhaley@gmail.com. Your name will not appear in the article.