

# Staffing With Emotional Intelligence

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Using emotional intelligence strategies to hire collections staff and training them in emotional intelligence leads to better patient–practice relationships and healthier finances.

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**T**he increasing prevalence of high-deductible insurance plans places more responsibility on practices to collect larger amounts of money at the time of service, which can be challenging for our patients. We can meet them in the middle and go from negotiation to collaboration by using policies that are respectful and fair and by calling on our emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence—being aware of how we act, interact, and react within relationships and how we handle our relationships based on that awareness—helps us manage our relationships with patients, staff, and physicians. For example, it helps us control our impulses when we are communicating with an irate patient about payment.

Reflecting empathy and understanding is essential to gaining patients' trust and helping them feel comfortable with all aspects of our practice—including making payments.

## SELECTING THE RIGHT STAFF

Top-performing salesclerks are 12 times more productive than those at the bottom and 85% more productive than average performers, according to research by Daniel Goleman, who has done groundbreaking work in the area of emotional intelligence and leadership and wrote the bestseller *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*.<sup>1</sup>

Patients' fears about not being able to afford current and future treatment can be reduced with empathy and assurance that the financial obstacle can be overcome. Whereas clinicians address treatment, one of the roles of the practice staff is to help patients feel reassured regarding their financial care.

As you hire collections staff, consider the practice's potential for success if you are using emotional intelligence in the selection process. Emotional intelligence can promote staff and patient engagement and, coupled with financial responsibility, can help accelerate a payment plan that is

personalized, is fair to the patient, and improves the collection process.

When you have a great relationship with a patient who always pays his or her bill, that connection places you (hopefully) first on the list to be remitted. Clearly, this is where relationships are important. Educate your staff members to know your patients and know how to set up payment plans in the most appropriate and respectful manner. Time and emotional intelligence invested in a process yield payment and profit.

## STAFFING THE CHECKOUT DESK

We had a wonderful person at checkout who was a stellar employee. The only problem was that her key phrase as she greeted patients was, "How much do you want to pay today, Hon?" Needless to say, the patients replied "Nothing," and we were left to wait for payment upon their receipt of a statement.

*A pleasant demeanor is most valuable in the person at the checkout desk, and can have a substantial impact on your revenue cycle.*

Not everyone is comfortable asking patients for money. This role typically is filled well by someone who is self-confident and is not afraid to speak up.

A pleasant demeanor is most valuable in the person at the checkout desk, and can have a substantial impact on your revenue cycle. It can be extra challenging for someone at checkout to collect at the end of an impossibly long visit where, for example, the patient had to wait hours to be seen, through no fault of his or her own. A perfect example?

The patient who said, “If you think I am going to pay a dime after I’ve waited over two hours with my stepmother to see an oncologist for final results to see how long she’s going to live, you’ve got another think coming!”

They may be even less likely to pay when no staff member at any time acknowledged and possibly apologized for the issues. Displaying and relaying empathy is our job, so given this scenario, one short statement from the receptionist relays compassion: “I’m so sorry you had to wait for so long. I know you were here longer than we had planned.” Simple, kind, and polite honesty goes a long way.

Because the deductible for the average high-deductible plan often involves thousands of dollars, patients are responsible for at least the initial visits and evaluation—and for many of our patients, that equals self-pay. The focus on time-of-service collections leads to increased responsibility at the front, with a patient advocate to assist when needed.

*Emotional intelligence tells us that those who have a role in negotiations are more likely to be an active part of the change rather than just following orders.*

The front desk and billing department can identify the type of patient and what appears to be a comfortable money amount before requesting that the patient meet with a billing staff member. Include both the front and billing staff members in these important conversations. Emotional intelligence tells us that those who have a role in negotiations are more likely to be an active part of the change rather than just following orders.

Receptionists can feel like the hamster in a wheel. They just keep going and going and don’t see the progress or results of their hard work. We all have to feel success with our work, finish projects, and see the reward. Yet front desk

staff rarely see the end result of their work, which might have served as affirmation of their value in the workplace. The emotionally intelligent leader lets staff know how their work affects patient flow and medical practice processes. That way, we all feel and share in the success.

The front desk schedules the appointment, checks in the patient, collects money, and enters demographic information. Your patient’s visit literally begins and ends with these staff members. The front desk staff know how patients may be approached when they are not feeling well or when they have just had a crisis. That is emotional intelligence, the awareness and empathy toward every patient who enters the door.

Many receptionists will tell you they recognize a patient’s car in the practice’s parking lot. We know patients that well and are proud of it! That is a pride that patients trust and that promotes their payment.

## WHAT CAN I DO NOW?

- Look for support between your billing and front desk departments. Use your emotional intelligence to train your staff to give each other total support in each of their roles, and they will truly work as a team at full potential for patient collections.
- Consider training in emotional intelligence for financial profitability. Being in tune with each other and your patients can assist in your advancing collections, especially at time of service at the front desk. Training can be done on line, in person, or virtually, and can be designed to address your specific situation and patient base.

Staff members should feel a reward for what they do; that’s what keeps them going. We all need to feel that our work has value, and we are in no better industry to experience this. ■■

## REFERENCE

1. Goleman D.



## Author Queries

AQ1: Is this information from the book you've listed? Please add it or the appropriate source as reference #1.

AQ2: Please add reference info for the information you cited - if it's his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*, please also provide publisher and year. If a journal article, title of article, title of journal, year, volume and issue, and page. If from Internet, name of website and URL for the posting.