The Work Covenant: A Management Strategy for Department Chairs and Program Directors

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Abstract: Learning contracts have been used in adult education to ensure a positive and successful learning process. By means of a learning contract, the instructor can support the learner in a manner that best suits the learner’s individual requirements. Understanding and applying the skills of the worker to appropriate tasks and interests have important ramifications for how workers perceive their jobs and the ultimate effectiveness of the organization. Studies show that the quality of the work environment is critical for the job satisfaction and retention of employees in the public and private sector as well as for the dental academician. Recent literature on faculty development has focused on adapting business-based motivation, mentoring, and performance counseling strategies to the academic setting. By leading and managing faculty development through the use of such strategies, the quality of the work environment can be improved. This article briefly summarizes the commonality between retention strategies and learning contracts within a human resource context and provides a model document that can be used by chairs and program directors to organize and focus their faculty development efforts.

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Given the current challenges facing the dental faculty workforce, the dental literature reflects a growing interest in leadership and management skills that can be applied in the academic setting.1-5 Like many work environments, the dental school work setting is filled with employees with varying skill sets and areas of interest, collectively called worker aptitude. New faculty are often hired for their content expertise, yet they lack other skills and abilities necessary for an academic career.2 These other skills include the ability to develop, implement, and assess clinical and didactic curriculum, the expertise to conduct research and other scholarly activity, or even the interpersonal skills necessary to function effectively in the academic environment or when performing service activities.2-4 Furthermore, the continued alignment of faculty members’ duties and responsibilities with their emerging interests is a process that varies per institution and progressively becomes less structured and nurturing during the life of a faculty member.2 Individual faculty members are often left to discover and develop their own skills and interests over the course of their careers and are expected to pursue faculty development offerings on their own initiative that appear to support their career goals. As a result, faculty may be put in a position to complete duties and responsibilities that lie outside their skill set, resulting in stress that is expressed in the work and/or home environment.5

Moreover, faculty may be faced with an organizational structure that hinders the expression of their emerging talents, fails to challenge them in areas of interest, does not provide necessary resources to support professional enhancement, or does not adequately reward them for their work effort. Clinical teaching responsibilities, the restriction of resources, ongoing changes in teaching strategies and methodologies, and seemingly conflicting goals such as requiring scholarly activity for promotion and tenure amidst a growing demand for faculty clinical productivity are additional points of ambiguity and tension.2-4 The resultant outcome is a faculty member who is disengaged, may seek to subvert the established structure, falters with respect to understanding how his or her daily activities apply to the mission, vision, and values of the organization, and generally functions with diminishing capacity and
effectiveness. As work production or effectiveness decreases and the expectations of administrators are not met, micromanagement may follow, which further drains the work environment of job satisfaction and any semblance of motivation. Conversely, the faculty member may be ignored or sequestered, leading to further alienation and nonproductivity.

Eventually, a threshold is reached where the primary intrinsic motivations that attracted the individual to academics (such as service to community, collegial stimulation, or a challenging position) are superseded by extrinsic monetary values that lead the faculty member to leave the work force. 

Shepherd et al. reviewed factors influencing the pursuit of faculty positions in dental education and identified salary, work environment, and workload as the critical factors in retention and recruitment. The influence of salary in career decisions was highly dependent upon the quality of the work environment and workload. If the environment was positive and included a well-balanced workload, then salary inequity with peers in private practice diminished in importance.

Unfortunately, the current climate in dental academics is detrimental to all three of these key factors. Faculty also report a lack of understanding of what is expected of them along with conflicts with personal commitments and the hindrance of professional socialization as cofactors in influencing their views of the work environment. More systemic workforce issues such as the “graying” of academic dental faculty, increasing reliance on part-time faculty, reductions in federal and state support, and lucrative private sector opportunities are additional impediments to a stable work climate now and into the foreseeable future.

As front-line managers of people, department chairs and program directors are called upon to close the chasm between the organization and the individual and create a work environment that is mutually beneficial and focused on achieving consensus on mission, vision, and values. They must foster growth and development of the individual, department, and organization amidst the aforementioned global issues, while also managing diversity, gender, individuality, and equity issues on a more intimate level. If achieved, such congruence and alignment among the mission, vision, and values of individual faculty members, the departments, and the school overall can produce effective organizational performance and improve employee job satisfaction and retention.

The key to managing this volatile climate is having the means and tools to do so while also having the appropriate degree of organizational freedom and support to implement necessary initiatives. Unfortunately, the instruments to assist faculty in this manner have for the most part been absent from the dental literature. Organizational support may require cultural changes at the institution and within academics as a whole. Drawing from the business literature, Glickman et al. described how motivation, mentoring, and performance counseling can be effective techniques for leading and managing faculty. Motivation includes casting a vision, being inclusive in decisionmaking, providing adequate support for faculty, and instituting effective rewards. Mentoring embraces personal and professional goal-setting and utilizes peer involvement and feedback in the growth and development process. Performance counseling, while delineating the responsibilities of the mentee, requires effective and open communication. These three tools require the development of trust and loyalty between the involved parties. If violated, the breaking of trust will foster disillusionment and deterioration of well-intentioned efforts. These tools have the capability to manage and direct faculty development while moving the faculty and organization towards complementary goals and values. The end result is enhancement of the work environment by reducing potential deterrents to their academic careers.

The ability to motivate and retain employees in the workplace has traditionally centered upon such extrinsic rewards as salary and other monetary compensation. Such compensation mechanisms are rarely available on a consistent basis in the academic setting. To be effective, monetary rewards must be equitable in their disbursement, provide adequate compensation for the effort given, and be disbursed close to completion of the task. However, monetary rewards fade in effectiveness over time.

More recently, and in light of difficult economic times, employers from all sectors are utilizing “soft benefits” to motivate and retain their employees as such benefits are less expensive to the organization and can be equally, if not more effective, motivators than monetary compensation. In essence, soft benefits are retention strategies that alter attitudes about the work environment and job satisfaction. Motivation, mentoring, and performance counseling are a direct extension of this soft benefit concept. Such benefits respond to intrinsic worker values and include efforts: 1) to show sensitivity to the desire of
employees to balance work and family; 2) to instill a deeper sense of cause and commitment to the organization’s mission; 3) to offer opportunities for professional growth and development reflective of the individual’s interests, goals, and aspirations; 4) to alter management strategies so that employees are treated like partners by seeking out and valuing their input and participation, thereby enabling employees to have influence over their job environment; and 5) to build a sense of community and teamwork within the workplace that embraces common values and establishes and rebuilds trust through honest and ethical behavior in managerial positions and throughout the organization.12-15 Successful implementation requires that managers respect and value the employee, thereby keeping them enthusiastic and energized.13,16 Christensen reports that employees want to be understood and valued, to learn new things, to regulate their own activities, and to achieve meaningful goals.14 He notes that it is vital that the manager discovers each individual employee’s needs and talents and then tailor the daily tasks and workplace to exploit these attributes for the benefit of the organization and the individual. Extending an effort to identify aptitudes, he says, can positively impact how the employee perceives management, as well as increase the likelihood of improved job performance and overall satisfaction.

Learning Contracts

Learning contracts or covenants have been used in adult education to ensure a positive and successful learning process as well as life-long learning habits that are critical to ongoing professional growth and development.17 They are applicable to both individual and group settings. The basic premise behind the contract is that all learners do not share the same interests and needs, nor do they have the same skill sets, backgrounds, and life experiences. It is this underlying premise in learning contracts that parallels faculty member aptitudes in the academic setting. By means of a learning contract, the instructor can support the learner in a manner that best suits his or her individual requirements.18

A learning contract is a direct extension of a behavioral contract whereby an agreement is drafted between two or more individuals that lists specific behaviors that the parties will perform and the consequences that will result if the contract is not fulfilled.19 The purpose of the contract is to systematically arrange for positive reinforcing in order to reach a desired goal.19 A study by Lemieux looked at learning contracts as a means to foster empowerment and accountability within the context of student and instructor learning.20 Similar findings have been reported in adult educational settings while also emphasizing that an interactive dimension—that is, relationship building—is at the heart of the adult learning experience.17-23 When using learning contracts, it was noted that respect, validation, ownership, and choice were identified as key components to achieving empowerment.20 Core features of the contracts focus on establishing the relationship between the learner and the instructor, the objectives to be achieved, the associated activities or task necessary to reach the objective, and a means of evaluation.21 Contracts are established through a negotiation process that invites collaboration, dialogue, and mutual accountability. The instructor becomes a facilitator, while the student accepts more personal responsibility for the learning experience. Learning contracts provide structure and boundaries, yet retain flexibility, provide motivation in relationship to the individual’s unique skill set, and allow for an element of self-determination while sharing power between the instructor and learner.19,20

Wickett outlined five principles that are critical to understanding how learning contracts work: the adult 1) is an independent, self-directed learner; 2) is capable of identifying needs and interests in learning; 3) is capable of planning a process for learning; 4) is capable of conducting the learning process; and 5) can bring closure and evaluate the learning process.18

Learning contracts, when adapted to human resource management, appear to have the potential to effectively link employee job satisfaction, motivation, mentoring, and performance evaluation and counseling as described by Glickman et al.3 Learning contract attributes that are translatable to the work environment include the following: 1) use of an open communication process between a leader and subordinate; 2) an accountability and empowerment process; 3) flexibility of structure and implementation; 4) recognition of the unique individuality and intrinsic value of the employee; 5) the introduction of teamwork and collaboration principles in a mentoring format; 6) establishment of a clear plan for accomplishing a goal; and finally, 7) providing a tool for assessment of performance within an overall framework that can direct employee motivation. The five learning contract principles outlined by Wickett could
then be redrafted and applied to the work environment: 1) the adult is capable of independent and self-directed work; 2) individual workers are capable of identifying what their needs are in completing a particular job as well as assessing their interest in it; 3) the adult is capable of planning out a work process; 4) the adult is capable of carrying out that work process; and 5) the adult can bring the work process to closure and evaluate the outcome. Implementation of these principles relies upon a manager-leader who is acutely aware of the individuality of his or her employees and can assist that individual to the degree necessary based upon the employee’s unique skill set and needs.

The Work Covenant Model

The work covenant is a human resource guidance tool with a dual purpose as it commits both employee and employer to a path of mutual benefit. It is an informal agreement between the faculty and the department chair or program director in which the faculty member is asked to perform a set of duties and responsibilities within the context of the mission, vision, and values of the organization at a departmental level. In reciprocal fashion, the organization recognizes the unique skills and abilities of the faculty member and seeks to apply those skills accordingly while committing to the creation of a work environment containing those items valued by the employee.

The word “covenant” can be substituted for the word “contract”—a distinction that is not only semantic but symbolic. The term “contract” connotes legality and implies a significant degree of formality and restriction. A covenant, however, conveys the impression of a relationship and carries a promise or pledge grounded in mutual trust.21 It is this concept that needs emphasis: that the manager and the worker are engaged in a relationship of trust intent upon mutual growth, development, and achievement, not a relationship of dos and don’ts that pits one side against another.

The document itself has four key areas: 1) a department-specific mission and vision statement; 2) clarity and prioritization of duties and responsibilities; 3) identification of the faculty member’s special skill set; and 4) identification of what the faculty member values in the workplace. Each section of the covenant will be briefly discussed. See Figures 1 and 2 for sample documents.

Mission and Vision

The value of mission and vision statements is evident from the literature.24-26 Straying from the mission and vision can adversely affect team effectiveness and cause workers to lose focus and lack clarity of purpose. Often, the mission and vision statement of the organization are never translated and made applicable to the day-to-day activities of the individual, department, or unit. The tailoring of the mission statement to the department level provides direction, imparts a unifying purpose, and instills a sense of pride as faculty and staff recognize their unique contribution to the organization as a whole (Figure 1). Without a common purpose to draw the leader and follower together, the work environment becomes incongruent and ambiguous, resulting in inconsistent commitment and effort.27

Employee Expectations: The Prioritization of Duties and Responsibilities

The objectives in this section are to provide direction with respect to the prioritization of duties and responsibilities, while also allowing the employee to make judgments regarding alteration or substitutions based on workload within the context of the mission and vision statement (Figure 1). Appropriate behavior and attitudes toward students, patients, fellow workers, and superiors are an important part of this discussion as they help to establish a healthy work climate and organizational culture. This process makes it clear to the chair and faculty member what is expected with respect to behavior and its impact on performance and performance assessment.13,28,29

Dialogue with individual faculty members is critical as they are allowed to express how they see their jobs and how they prioritize their work. Through initial and ongoing communication, consensus is achieved and maintained as to how the successful completion of tasks is defined. This negotiation process can be easily introduced during the annual review process, with periodic meetings throughout the year as deemed appropriate by the department chair or program director. Communication at this level provides a sense of empowerment to employees, giving them a voice and an opportunity to influence how their work is carried out and how it is viewed by the organization.12-15 Mutually setting priorities and standards also establishes the foundation for using the
(Organization or Department Name)

**Mission:** (Enter departmental mission statement based upon the contribution that the department makes to the mission of the organization.)

**Vision:** (Enter departmental vision statement based upon department direction and connection to organization.)

**Employment Position:**

**My Employment Expectations are:** (The term “expectations” is used instead of “duties and responsibilities” in an effort to remind both the chair/program director and the employee of the connection between the duties and responsibilities and the organization/department’s values and behavior. Expectations are prioritized as primary, secondary, and tertiary depending on their relative importance to the mission of the department. Employees are given the freedom to choose vertically and horizontally based upon work conditions.)

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**My special skill set is:** (The special skills, unique to the individual, are listed here. During the negotiation process, these skills are highlighted for the way in which they enrich the department and contribute to its success.)

Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Figure 1. Sample document regarding mission and vision, employee expectations, and special skill set
covenant as a framework for performance appraisals and counseling.

Throughout this process, the department chair’s role is one of a facilitator who, through active listening, has gained an appreciation for the faculty member’s daily schedule. Such insight can be used to ensure that individual faculty members are applying their strengths accordingly on a day-to-day basis, that they have the resources necessary to complete their jobs, and that obstructive policies and procedures or other barriers are effectively removed. If barriers cannot be eliminated, simply looking into and challenging them on behalf of the employee reflect a genuine interest in the well-being of the employee and help to reinforce trust. Eliminating or minimizing such frustrations can positively impact morale and motivation.

This section also serves as the foundation for two additional attributes of the work covenant. First, the covenant can be used as a basis for performance evaluation. Historically, a major stumbling block to effective performance appraisals has been the unwillingness of managers to provide accurate assessments and the lack of personal meaningfulness for the employee.29 While superiors feel that appraisals are something they should do, they are often filled with hesitation due to uncomfortable interpersonal issues that can surface during the appraisal process such as defensiveness, unpleasant conversation, and confrontation. Furthermore, the rating systems may not be sensitive to the individual duties and responsibilities of the employee, may not account for limitations of resources or other impediments to task completion, and may not be sufficiently linked to concrete behaviors and organizational values. This incongruence results in subjective personality traits surfacing in the assessment process, complicating the exchange of valid information, and calling into question the ultimate benefit of the process for the organization and the employee.28,29

By using the covenant strategy to accurately define what is expected from the employee with respect to duties and responsibilities and by incorporating organizational values and work behaviors into performance assessments, management can change how people work and how they work together.28 This process moves performance assessment or measurement into the realm of performance management and counseling, where employer and employee mutually participate in a process that reviews goals and objectives, notes areas of job efficiency, recognizes innovations, and addresses how to apply organizational values for guiding employee behavior.28 Through the negotiation process, boundaries, standards, and expectations for performance are discussed and established. These can be used as reference points during quarterly and/or annual performance evaluations as well as provide an objective backdrop to an often-subjective evaluation process. Since both parties participated in the establishment of the covenant, there should be little variation as to its interpretation. It is a document conducive to renegotiation and disciplinary language if need be.

The emerging emphasis on mentoring and performance counseling of dental education faculty is a relationship-building effort that will require an investment of time, regardless of the method used to carry it out. The success or failure of any effort ultimately rests upon the individuals involved. In the context of covenants, Wickett describes the time commitment as creating space for the learner.21 The work covenant is a front-loaded, initial time commitment instrument that must be weighed against the long-term potential benefits in the management of faculty. The work contract offers the department chair or program director the opportunity to organize and focus faculty member activities towards the departmental mission and vision with a desired level of structure, accountability, and purpose. It also serves as a means to keep the department chair or program director centered on that mission and vision, so as to avoid distraction by superfluous issues when they confront wayward faculty during the performance assessment process. Ramsden notes that the behaviors characteristic of a difficult colleague are signals that call for careful observation and the crafting of potential solutions by the department chair or program director before the situation escalates.30 The avoidance of overreactions as well as early intervention and prevention in such cases are important leadership skills to master.30 Ultimately, the time invested in this covenant process as a preventive measure to eliminate, minimize, or constructively direct confrontational and uncomfortable situations could save organizational resources that would otherwise be spent in managing a deteriorating situation that spills out from the department or remains chronically unresolved and problematic.

Finally, the covenant can be a useful tool in the recruitment process. Having a department-focused mission and vision statement along with delineation of job duties and responsibilities tied to
values helps the manager clarify what type of individual would best fill the vacancy. The ability to articulate to prospective faculty what duties and behavior are associated with the open position gives the candidate a realistic picture of the job. While each individual is unique and diversity is important in the workplace, it is also important that the environment is centered on core values that are acceptable to the individual and the organization. The blending of personalities, interests, and desires creates the norms and culture of the organization. Delineation of unacceptable behavior and adherence to a departmental mission and vision statement enhances and fosters the team concept while encouraging a common work ethic and value system.

**Special Skill Set**

Highlighting and celebrating the unique contribution that the individual faculty member brings to the mission of the department are both critical to the work environment (Figure 1). The objective is to identify and recognize the aptitudes of the faculty and what they enjoy doing. While this may take time and careful observation by the chair or program director, it is important to identify the special skills that an individual brings to the workplace and to recognize how these skills fit into the success of the department and institution. Such recognition instills a sense of self-worth and pride, while acknowledging the value of that employee to the collective whole. While it may not be feasible to redesign positions to fit the faculty member, it is possible to selectively assign them projects that match their talents and abilities or to offer opportunities for personal growth and development consistent with these skills or the lack thereof.

Communicating to the employee an interest in identifying their special skill set also establishes an environment in which the organization values the individuality of the faculty member. Such an environment is often responded to positively by the employee. The resourceful manager who has this knowledge about his or her employees is better able to direct these individuals to work that will engage them or can quickly shuffle the human resources of the department to address special projects that arise. These are opportunities for employees to fully express their talents, resulting in job satisfaction and improved effectiveness for the organization.

**Employee Values**

The previous sections have focused on what the organization expects from the employee, how employee behavior should reflect organizational values, and how the individual makes a unique contribution to operational success. The final section reverses the process by asking the faculty member what they value in the ideal academic workplace. This reflects the reciprocal nature of the document and the duality of commitment and accountability (Figure 2). By asking “what can the organization do for you?” the department chair, program director, and the organization have the keys to unlocking individual job satisfaction, motivational rewards, and long-term retention needs of the employee.

Rarely does an organization ask individual employees what they value in the workplace and what their desires and interests are. If asked, employees will list items like interesting work, personal growth, the development of new skills, an expanded range of benefits, or opportunities for health and wellness. A review of Shepherd et al.’s study of the factors that influence retention and recruitment in dental faculty reveals a parallel finding in that only two of the top ten items are related to salary or some other form of monetary compensation. To further ensure job satisfaction, motivation, and retention, it is the manager’s responsibility to act upon these values and direct the faculty member to available organizational resources or to secure for the employee those not readily available. Depending on the items identified by the faculty member, they can be used for general improvement of the work environment or held in reserve for recognition of outstanding performance or rewarding sustained excellence.

**Conclusion**

“Doling out merit increases or bonuses in the name of motivation is one thing,” says Christensen. “Discovering individual needs and talents and then tailoring work to exploit them on behalf of the organization is quite another.” Adapting the learning contract to the work environment gives the department chair or program director an effective tool to create a positive work environment that motivates the employee and offers the opportunity to enhance job satisfaction as well as boost morale, cohesive-
(Organization or Department Name)

**Personal Values in the Workplace:** Within an organization, it is recognized that each individual is unique and has his or her own expectations of their job. Please consider the following when identifying what you value in the workplace: “My expectations are met when those things that I value are upheld and supported within the workplace. What is it about my job that provides fulfillment and enjoyment and makes the job worth getting up and doing each day? Listed below are positive statements that reflect what I value in a job, a leader, and a work environment.”

**The things I value in my job and workplace:**

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Figure 2. Sample document regarding employee values
ness, and team effectiveness. It involves a negotiation process that is inclusive and instills an understanding of the organization’s mission, vision, and values as it applies to day-to-day operations. It gives faculty members an understanding of what is expected of them and how they fit into organizational success, as well as giving the chair greater insight into the employee’s own understanding of his or her role. It also establishes boundaries for behavior and gives clear direction on performance of duties, while also recognizing and utilizing the aptitudes of the faculty member. Finally, it affirms the dynamic reciprocal relationship between the organization and the employee by seeking what the employee values in the ideal workplace and committing the organization to meeting those desires given the resources available. As such, this simple document can be used to organize and focus department motivation, mentoring, and performance counseling strategies while enhancing overall managerial and leadership effectiveness in the work environment.

REFERENCES