

MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN DENTAL PRACTICES

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Hi, I'm not a management expert. Only I want to share some important aspects of management skills those are applicable in dental practice, which I've gathered after 10 years of private practice and as a student of hospital management.

The growing complexity and sophistication of dental practices has resulted in a greater need for careful management. This trend will surely continue with several new developments under way, including the growing acceptance of new types of para- professionals such as the Dental Auxiliaries, a possibility of national dental health legislation in the foreseeable future, and a growing number of group practices, to name a few.

Larger and more complex practices require more sophisticated management, and more difficult patients (as well as worker) scheduling decisions, greater needs for personnel management skills, more complicated financial control, and so on.

As an example, let's suppose that a dentist experiencing considerable patient pressure is thinking of expanding his practice and introducing dental auxiliaries. Such an important decision should not be taken lightly. The precise amount of expansion must also be considered. Clearly, it is highly desirable to analyze the situation systematically, following a step-by-step decision-making process. The various factors affecting the decision should be identified, evaluated, and weighed.

COMMUNICATION

“We believe that proper communication is perhaps the key to any dental practice. Our studies have shown that the practice of dentistry is 90 percent communication and 10 percent clinical, and we are by no means minimizing the importance of your clinical skills. Simply put, the offices that never stop working on giving the best possible answers to the questions patients ask are by far the most successful. Our advice is to have frequent team meetings that emphasize a warm and caring environment every step of the way, and you will soon notice a significant increase in your practice.”

-Dr. David Madow and Dr. Richard Madow, The Madow Brothers, madow.com

Every dental patient has a story they want to tell – let them tell it before you start telling them about periodontal pockets and crowns. Ask your patients what their biggest concerns are with dental care. Then, stop talking and listen – really listen – to what they say. Then you will find out what you have to do to make it as easy as possible for your patients to benefit from your care.

YOUR TEAM

“When everyone does everything, no one's accountable for anything.” Defining duties at the desk is the key to efficiency. The scheduling coordinator's three main duties are answering the telephone, greeting patients who walk in and engineering the schedule. The financial coordinator is responsible for presenting the fees, posting payments and handling all insurance.

As your team grows and it is time to hire – or you need to replace a team member – do your homework. Take

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time to prepare yourself and your team prior to promoting the position. Have a clear picture of the type of person you want to hire, their level of experience, personality style and complimentary values.

Dental offices are service organizations, and service organizations improve the bottom line by having satisfied staff. Our patients see themselves through the prism of our staff, including the doctor. The level of satisfaction that they see is reflected back to them. If they see happy, satisfied staff, then they're likely to be happy, satisfied patients.

You and your entire team need to stay focused and positive. Learn and stay fresh, but don't jump from course to course hoping to find that one that brings the big windfall; the diamonds are in your backyard. Select the services you like to provide and offer them. Don't over-treat, but don't diagnose and under-recommend. Tell patients what they need and what you can do, then let them decide. Expect acceptance.

LEADERSHIP

There are three key steps for today's world. Own it: take personal responsibility. Don't get caught in the trap of blaming and complaining about anything. Negative mindsets create negative results. Own what is happening. Victimization gets a person nowhere. Continually ask, "What can I do?" Search for answers and then do it. Lead it: transform your practice staff into a genuine team to lighten the owner's load while improving the patient experience. Exceptional results come from exceptional leadership and teambuilding. Perfect it: relentlessly pursue perfection on the fundamentals of exceptional patient care with particular focus on effective patient and team communication.

The doctor must be a subjective leader – passionate and committed about his or her work. As a leader, the doctor must have a vision of the preferred future of the practice, and the design systems and management to meet those objectives. The doctor needs to retain someone who is responsible for the day-to-day objectivity of office operations while he or she works their passion. In line with that, the fine line between employer and employee must be maintained. Being a leader and role model means caring for each member of the team, while remembering that an employee is an employee and making the distinction clear.

"As a consultant to dental practices across the country, it is my observation that the most successful practices have a leader who understands the value of money, knows how to save, and does not spend excessively; understands that the most valuable practice asset is the staff group and invests in their continual development; believes every patient is

important; has a life outside of the practice; is balanced physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually; and is willing to accept advice from knowledgeable counsellors related to any of the above."

-Dianne Glasscoe Watterson, Professional Dental Management

Early in my career, I was advised to extend hours into evenings and weekends and to offer as many services as I could. Basically, to try to be attractive to as many people as possible. I got burned out and hated my job. It was either quit, or change my practice. I slowed down, chose to do only the procedures that I liked and was good at, and limited my hours. I didn't try to be all things for everybody. Dare to dream about what a fun day would be like, and offer it to nice, appreciative clients only. Be patient – they really will come.

Effective leadership is the key to practice success. Any action missed will hold profits back. Do not hit your profitability wall!

- Assume leadership role and lead by example
- Ask how things can be done better
- Define your vision and share it
- Work with excellent advisors and mentors
- Create a yearly business plan that defines goals and budget
- Monitor practice vital signs monthly and expenses quarterly
- Hold regular morning, team and department meetings
- Understand each employee's strengths and motivators
- Consistently hold employees accountable for appropriate behavior and job performance
- Coach to success
- Hold performance reviews annually
- Praise, appreciate and recognize employees regularly

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Don't neglect the tried and true when it comes to promoting your practice: public relations, focusing on community newspapers and websites. Even with the waning influence of traditional media, local media – approached from a public relations or editorial perspective – is still a good value for your practice. Dentists can often access a number of free local media websites and upload their own news releases and pictures.

Be sure to manage your online presence! A

majority of potential patients will be looking for a dentist on search engines like Google, Bing and Yahoo.

TREATMENT

Dental practices can operate like a wellness centre. Commitment to the overall health of the patient means a practice not only stands out from the crowd, it makes that practice a key player in the healthcare arena, working alongside physicians supporting the general health and wellbeing of patients. Dental practices can learn to look at and treat our patients as more than just mouths. Dentists and team members can learn the signs and symptoms that point to systemic disease, and can become more proactive in referring patients to their primary care physicians when they suspect an underlying medical condition.

Know your percentage of case acceptance. This should be tracked, along with the reason why treatment is declined. Without this information, it is challenging to know how to increase your income or raise the level of health your patients are choosing. When you know the “why,” you are on the road to greater profits and healthier patients! A patient saying “yes” is only partial case acceptance. You also need signed financial arrangements and a scheduled appointment. Without all three of these in place, you only have a patient that is interested in their treatment, not committed.

TECHNOLOGY AND SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT

The magic behind the digital revolution is that a computer is a single device that can be set up to do many tasks that all required separate systems in the past. Just like a smart phone is not just a phone but a camera, GPS, game boy, web browser, and just about anything else we can find in the app store, a computer can now be used for charting, X-rays, photos, diagnoses, recall, billing, impressions and much more. Your practice's computer system is not just a computer but it is the core of the practice – and everything in the future will be dependent upon it.

The most important aspect of practice management today is for practices to focus on continually increasing production by implementing effective systems

A very important part of managing the dental office is the practice management software and its proper use. This means actual training from the manufacturer, as opposed to someone teaching the new person in their spare time. Many systems now have training capabilities with videos, as well as online chat or real voice communication using remote access. Help has also been made easier with internet-enabled support centers when questions

arise even for experienced users. When updates or changes are made, everyone should be made aware of them at staff meetings or other communications the office has decided upon.

TIME MANAGEMENT

The most valuable commodity we have is time.

1. Delegate - let others help you
2. Make lists - for today, tomorrow, etc.
3. Don't procrastinate - that makes you stressed
4. Clear the clutter - stay focused
5. Avoid time wasters like the internet
6. Answer all emails at once, instead of throughout the day
7. Focus on one thing at a time

"Those who rule the practice schedule, rule the practice." I have found this statement to be true in every practice with which I've worked. Does your front office team know what is expected of them when scheduling appointments? Are you overbooked some days, and don't have enough patients on others? The remedy to this is showing your team what your ideal schedule looks like. Always be sure to allow room for emergencies and keep a list of patients that are on stand-by so you can fill those last minute cancellations. This helps everyone in the office stay productive.

HAVING A VISION

No successful company can function for any significant amount of time without a clearly defined plan of how they will function. I would strongly suggest that every dentist, no matter how successful, consider creating a written plan of where they want their practice to be and how they expect to take it there. There's an old saying: “If you don't know where you're going, any road can take you there.” Working on things like case acceptance, better treatment planning, expanded services or even leadership are a waste of time unless the practice has a plan for long-term success.

RELATIONSHIP

"In my years of dental practice management, treatment planning, and lecturing to dentists both nationally and internationally, I have found that the first step in enrolling people in listening to what you have to say is to establish a relationship with them. Once the thread of commonality is established in a genuine and honest way, a matrix forms where trust can find a home. Genuine listening, both actively and

passively, play a huge role in the process. I have found that people respond so much better when they are allowed to express themselves and understanding becomes bilateral.”

-Dr. George E. Bambara, Gentle Dental Smiles, gentledentalsmiles.com

The most important thing a dental office can do is to respect the patient as an individual. Each patient is an individual and each patient should be treated as if they are a family member. To show patients you care is to call a patient in the evening after an extensive procedure, i.e. surgery, just to see how the patient is doing. It is amazing the results you get from this small show of caring.

“It's all about relationships.” The way to communicate comprehensive dentistry to a patient begins by establishing a relationship of trust which is based on the doctor's innate understanding of how the mouth works. By owning the ability to make a diagnosis, the doctor can focus on the patient's concerns and serve them well. The result we are seeking is for the patient to know they have been heard and are in good hands. This relationship of trust needs to be continually strengthened through congruent office policies, systems and personnel that put the patient first.

OTHER ELEMENTS OF A SUsSESSFUL PRACTICE

'There are two elements to having a successful practice: your team and your brand. I encourage team members to voice opinions that may improve the practice. When a team member has a suggestion or constructive criticism, you should listen. You'll gain respect by respecting your team member – part of being respectful is listening. The other element is to have a practice brand. What makes your practice different from practices that you compete with? Your office hours, your whitening smiles program, your laser dentistry? You must decide on your practice brand and let your patients know what it is that makes your practice special." -Dr. Fred S. Margolis,

Institute for Advanced Dental Education, Ltd., fredmargolis.com

Clinical efficiency is one of the quickest and easiest ways to lower your office overhead. You can have all the practice management systems in the world, but if the dentist cannot produce an excellent clinical result for the patient efficiently, then the office will have high overhead and low production.

During these economic times, it is wise to see how to improve practice productivity and efficiency. Here are some examples: offer flexible financial plans, add Google optimization, provide a small gift to patients who refer, maintain a budget of six to seven percent for supplies, look into refinancing your practice loan, reduce disability insurance costs by extending the elimination periods, try to renegotiate a better lease rate on your current space, call patients after appointments, and review how you are doing in these areas:

1. Friendly staff
2. Prompt appointments
3. Clearly explained costs
4. Sufficient appointment reminders
5. A clean office
6. Painless anesthesia

If you're remodeling, you need to answer these questions: “Will this space meet my needs? How much will this space cost to build out?” Have the space reviewed by an experienced dental office designer and a qualified contractor. When designing a dental office, make sure that your project has complete plans and specifications. Most sources of frustration are due to incomplete project documents. Complete, “permit ready” plans include an architect's seal. Never rely upon a “cost per square foot” number for your renovations. These guesses, while well intentioned, are not accurate enough to make such a large financial commitment.

At the end I want to say 'happy and prosperous dental practice' to the beginner dental surgeons.