“In order for a business owner to be an effective leader, he or she must delegate”

The idea that in this day and age dentists can keep the business side of the practice in-house is considered by some as no longer possible.

How do you think the business of dentistry has changed over the last two decades?

In a hundred ways! When I was practicing hygiene in Colorado, implant dentistry and integration of practice software and electronic health records were the frontier we were navigating. At that time, running a dental practice from within was completely manageable, and we had all the time we needed to stay on top of the systems we had in place. However, now we have seen technology, student debt, patient expectation, science, materials, employee expectation, insurance, regulations, marketing, connectivity and work–life balance shift in drastic ways. I don’t believe it is possible for a business owner to expect to keep all in-house any longer. It is costlier, and there is a greater chance of mismanagement. I believe that, in order for a business owner to be an effective leader, he or she must delegate and outsource tasks and systems in the practice.

You have met with many dentists over the years. When it comes to the difficulties of running a business, have there been any recurring issues?

In so many practices, there is a lack of general understanding of putting systems in place and then creating a culture of accountability. Basic leadership skills are missing from our education system, so when a business owner is challenged with controlling the chaotic schedule or helping his or her team understand how to answer the phone, or even making sure that the money owed to the practice is collected, he or she does not know how to train and motivate the team to accomplish these tasks. And it is never just one thing! There are always multiple systems out of place and lacking, and it becomes overwhelming for dentists to try and implement successfully—they just want to practice dentistry! Eventually, chaos ensues, and all the systems fail. That’s when I usually hear from a dentist.

How do you think practice owners would be best served in understanding what it means to run a business?

I believe that there is a huge need for more business exposure in medical and dental education. In dental school experience having emphasized physiological systems and processes that are not critical to the day-to-day practice of dentistry; however, there is no discussion about how to understand a profit and loss statement, leadership, or the why behind creating and understanding the business figures. I am a part of a Facebook group led by a dentist who is on a mission to provide a taste of what it takes to run a business for dental students and business owners alike. He told me once that he has never seen a dentist lose his or her practice over a poor Class II composite restoration, but we have all seen practices flounder and fail because of poor customer service or because the dentist does not understand the overhead.

I have heard it said that the dental curriculum does not allow time for business education, although some have shared with me that this is an excuse to avoid change. Can a single semester (which is still not enough!) of basic dental practice business be so difficult to carve out? Or what if business courses were required as prerequisites for dental school? Help students understand basic economic principles for the self-employed, human resources do’s and don’ts, etc. That would be a great start.

What are some of the most prominent business mistakes you have seen dental practice owners make over the years?

Waiting too long to ask for help. Often, the excuse for the new business owner is budgeting, and I completely understand that. However, carving out the means to pay for help early on will save the business owner so much money, time and heartache down the road!

I have been around some of the best people in dentistry for decades—consultants, speakers, teachers—who have many, many testimonials from clients who recognized the benefit of help within a few years of starting their businesses and have been successful in implementing what they have been taught. And yet they often say they wish they had contacted us sooner. Just like decay is easier to fix when it is small and doesn’t hurt, hiring an outside source early to help you determine what to put in place and how to do that will be the best investment in yourself and your business.

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In what capacity have you been working within dentistry?

I like to say that I fell into dentistry by accident! After moving from Washington state to Colorado without a job, a friend asked if I would be interested in training as an assistant, and I jumped at the prospect of a paycheck! I fell in love with dentistry and immediately started prerequisites for hygiene school. Eventually, I transitioned into office management, and then software training and light consulting. Ultimately, in 2013, I achieved a long-term goal of becoming a full-time consultant for a well-respected national firm in the U.S. In January this year, I struck out on my own as a consultant and speaker, and I am loving it!

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Dental Material GmbH
24537 Neumünster / Germany
Tel. +49 43 21 / 5 19 08
Fax +49 43 21 / 5 19 08
eMail info@promedica.de
Internet www.promedica.de