Individuals play the game, but teams win championships

What it takes to build the ultimate practice unit

By Lina Craven, UK

It is said that all teams are groups, but all groups are teams. What separates the two is interdependence. A true team is focused on a common purpose; team members support one another and enhance each other’s work and contribution. Andrew Carnegie captured this accurately when he said, “Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.”

I know that achieving the ultimate team is possible, because when I was a dental nurse many years ago in America, I was part of an ultimate team. What made us great was our leader, Dr Derick Tagawa. He and his partner had a very clear vision and they knew exactly what was needed from each one of us to ensure the practice achieved its desired results. In turn, each one of us knew that every challenge we faced was an opportunity for personal, professional and practice growth.

Practices with a motivated, focused and empowered team produce excellent results; consequently, patient satisfaction is high and practitioners realise increased financial rewards. Achieving such a team is not pie in the sky, but it does require complete commitment from the whole team. Based on my own experience of being a part of a high-performing team and my observations as a consultant to practices, here are my key principles for the creation of an ultimate team.

Do not confuse being the boss with being a leader. Leaders set the tone for the practice. They lead by positive example. Successful teamwork starts at the top with leaders who provide strategic vision and establish team goals. Effective leaders clearly define their vision and share it with their team to establish a common purpose.

Any successful relationship can only survive if values are shared, believed and agreed upon, values like honesty, respect, integrity, commitment to each other, commitment to the practice success. Shared values help to build an effective team and to establish its culture, conduct, rules and policies. The key is to ensure the entire team agrees on the same values and is prepared to work by them. According to the world’s finest flight demonstration team (the Blue Angels, US Navy), “without shared values, peak performance isn’t possible” and “a team’s values must align with its purpose, mission, and actions.”

Every team member, from the leader to the cleaner, must learn to communicate clearly and effectively. Successful relationships are built on positive, honest and open feedback. Is information shared openly and honestly in your team? Does gossip or negative chatter exist in your practice? Team members must learn to address concerns, deal with conflict and accept responsibility for the success of other team members. When conflict occurs, it must be dealt with honestly, directly and openly as soon as possible and in line with the team’s adopted values. Foster positive attitudes and creative thinking — attitudes can either make or break the team dynamics, so there is no place for negative people.

Do all your team members have clear and up-to-date job descriptions? Are they all qualified to undertake their roles? Are there written procedures for every area of the practice? I often hear team members say they are not sure who is responsible for something, or they do not have a job description, or they were promised training when they started, but have not yet received any owing to the practice being too busy. Empowerment results from clear definitions and a shared understanding of one another’s roles. Cross-training increases efficiency and makes each person more productive and valuable to the team.

Each team member is a cog in the practice’s wheel of success. However, many are often under-utilised to his or her full potential and thus become bored or complacent. Dr Tagawa believed in providing the best training for his staff. He also recognised that he may lose some individuals who desired greater career progression than the practice could offer. He knew nevertheless that those who remained would perform at their peak and more than justify his investment.

Every morning in Dr Tagawa’s practice as part of our commitment to the team, we would meet 30 minutes prior to the start of the day to prepare for the show. The head receptionist had a simple but effective system for updating us with vital information, including how many patients we could expect that day ahead.

It is said that what motivates individuals most is recognition — a pat on the back or a word of praise here and there for a job well done. Embrace this principle and, although it may feel awkward at first, if it is done often enough it becomes a habit. Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart Stores, said: “Appreciate everything your associates do for the business. Nothing else can quite substitute for a few well-chosen, well-timed, sincere words of praise. They’re absolutely free and worth a fortune.”

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Consistency is critical to creating the ultimate team; it fosters credibility and trust. Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles wrote in their book Raving Fans, “customers allow themselves to be seduced into becoming raving fans only when they know they can count on you time and time again.” This is also true for teams; we refer to them as “loyal followers” with “team members” if we often hear people say things like “one day we’re instructed to do something and the next day it becomes something else.” If you want to be part of the ultimate team, be consistent.

Successful leaders embrace the power of teamwork by tapping into the innate strengths each person brings to the table.” Blue Angels, US Navy

It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results. What it takes to build the ultimate practice unit. Building the ultimate team does represent a challenge, but once achieved it is hugely rewarding. There is no point implementing one principle in isolation. It is like baking a cake without the eggs.