Team Building

By Dr. Ehab Heikal, Egypt

Team building begins with leadership. As the clinic owner, the dentist is viewed by the team as the leader. The team looks to the dentist as a role model in every area, including quality care of patients, attitude, customer service and desire for change. The dentist sets the tone for the clinic, whether by choice or not. Effective leaders give their team members the tools and opportunities necessary to enhance their performance.

**TEAM BUILDING STEP BY STEP**

In terms of building a superior team, there are several things you can do that can pay back now and in the future.

**Monthly staff meetings**

Monthly staff meetings are a critical element of team building. These should be approximately two hours in length and include an agenda that is followed strictly. Areas to be discussed should include clinical goals, customer service, office improvements and necessary training. The dentist should be particularly attentive to comments made at the meeting by staff members, as the dentist will learn a number of things that often are seen only by the team. For example, many patients share information at the front desk that they do not share with the dentist or the clinical team.

It must be made clear that full participation by all team members is necessary for successful staff meetings. The dentist should ask team members for their opinions, encourage them to participate and make it clear that the meeting is about the entire office. To accomplish this, a “safe” environment must be established so that staff members participate fully. Starting each meeting with team members and reporting something that has happened in the office opens everyone’s mind to better ideas and positive interactions.

**Daily meetings**

Every clinic should have 10-minute morning meetings. These should center primarily on that specific day. The benefit of morning meetings is that they organize the day, send a clear message to the team that this is an organized office, create an opportunity to discuss any potential problems and provide a calm and focused beginning to each day. Even the best-run dental offices at times tend to be hectic, and this should be the 10 minutes during which everyone is able to communicate. Finally, since they focus only on that particular day, the morning meetings are not run by the dentist but by the scheduling coordinator.

**Job description**

The dentist should establish a job description for every team member in the practice. The dentist should take time to develop these carefully or to identify another source that can help create accurate job descriptions. A job description is not as simple as a mere statement of what the candidate is to do. It also should include a philosophy statement; a list of required skills; a list of other job activities; and a list of responsibilities, accountabilities and other information about how job performance will be evaluated.

When each team member understands his or her job description, he or she has the opportunity to live up to it. A practice that never clearly identifies what the job is and what is required of the team member in that position will have a higher level of conflict. Owing to the hectic pace of most dental clinics, new employees often must learn as they go, which can lead to misunderstandings and poor performance if the right systems are not in place.

**Performance reviews**

Every clinic should have regular performance reviews for each dental team member. I suggest that these occur twice a year. Performance reviews should reflect the job description and cover four key topics:

- What has gone right in the last six months?
- What does the team member need to improve during the next six months?
- How can the clinic or office manager do a better job?
- How can the dentist or office manager do a better job?

These four topics will focus the discussion on the concept of continuous cyclical improvement. It is identified in the management science known as “total quality management.” The goal is not to criticize the team member, but rather to focus on how the team member, office manager and dentist all can do a better job in working together. This approach focuses on how to build a better team rather than strictly on the team member. If the team member is not doing an acceptable job, the dentist or office manager must step in and work with the person to improve performance.

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**Social activity**

Another way to build a superior team is to have at least one quarterly social activity outside the office for the entire team. This is not a reward for excellent performance, but a team-building opportunity. For that reason, continuing education (though important) would not count as the social, out-of-office activity. Ideas for this activity include a dinner with the entire team, a trip to a sporting event or an all-day meeting at a separate location to talk about the future of the clinic. These types of activities provide an excellent opportunity for team members to step out of their office roles and work together. It has been observed that practices that do this tend to be higher-performing offices.

Dentists often have little time to focus on team building during productive patient days. Communication and encouragement are keys to building a strong team. By taking the steps described above, dentists can eliminate many gray areas that can lead to misinterpretation and derail team building. The result is a happy dentist and an even happier office team focused on the goals and direction necessary for clinic success.

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