Clinic Values

By Dr. Ehab Heikal, Egypt

Values are a difficult quantifiable business topic to write about because they can be hard-as a business technique-to develop, and use to make better decisions and build high-powered teams.

What Are Values?
Values are what you believe in. Most people have a sense of what they believe. Even if they don't realize it, they have a set of values that they live by. These can be referred to as personal values. Most chief executive officers (and dentists are CEOs as discussed before) also have a separate set of business values. This section will focus on business values.

In most cases, dentists have not defined their business values. Even though values influence behavior, dentists may not have consciously identified the key values that they bring to their clinic. By not identifying values, they often make decisions concerning the clinic in general, and hiring in particular that eventually conflict with the dentist's values. Certain people may be good employees but not right for a particular clinic if their values conflict with those of the dentist. That conflict can lead to tension and discontent-a problem for any business.

For example, suppose a dentist's key values are integrity, excellence, quality, innovation, profit and recognition. This is not a dental clinic in which the dentist is happy to have a below-average production and profit and little change in services offered. This is a dentist who wants to provide outstanding care, but who also wants to be well compensated and respected for the excellence in quality his clinic provides. Another dentist may find the quest for profit and recognition less important. He or she may be more than satisfied to have the same income every year, live moderately and enjoy a reputation as an everyday dentist in the community. Clearly, values take these two clinics in very different directions.

Identifying values helps in the hiring process as well. Many dentists find it challenging to work with team members who have conflicting values. For example, a dentist who places value on hard work and believes in a strong work ethic hires a person who does not value punctuality and who wants a 9-to-5 job with as much free time and vacation as possible.

If the dentist has not identified his or her hard-work values, this team member's behavior will be the source of tremendous conflict. Each will view the other as insensitive, rigid and unreasonable.

Identifying Clinic Values
To identify clinic values, make a list of what you feel are the core of your clinic values or beliefs. This list might include such terms as integrity, balance, profit, growth, challenge, caring, excellence, quality, trust, appreciation, self-motivation, and enthusiasm. After you have created a list, the key is to spend the next few days paring it down to no more than six to ten words. The rule is that you can add a word to the list, but only if you take one off. You can combine words that have similar meaning, such as integrity and honesty or excellence and quality. You ultimately will have to eliminate less important words.

At the end of this exercise, you will finalize your business values list. Do not judge your values against someone else's. A dentist seeking recognition from peers and community is no better or worse than a dentist who has no desire to be in the spotlight.

What To Do With The Values
Now comes the practical part. A staff meeting in which you identify and discuss the values and explain to your team how they will guide the practice is a powerful meeting. This helps your team understand you. It helps your team understand the values that you bring to the clinic and how the clinic will use them to achieve success. Values also are helpful in decision making. If your team members understand the core values of the clinic, they will be able to make better decisions in all situations. More often than not, a decision taken into account business values will be a good one. This holds true even in management of worst-case scenarios. If a clinic value is integrity, a staff member holding true to clinic values may tell a patient that a patient's crown did not come back from the laboratory on time and that he or she is very sorry. This is infinitely better than giving patients transparent excuses. Finally, values are a powerful interviewing and hiring tool. If you simply ask candidates for a list of their values, they will be unlikely to provide them quickly or easily (remember that they have not done the exercise). After you explain your values and give specific examples, ask candidates to reflect on their ability to operate within the confines of these values. The answers you receive will give you a good indication of the most appropriate candidate to work in your clinic. Discussing your values helps you hire people who are the least likely to conflict with the values of the dentist and members of the team.

Once you know your main business values, you can strengthen your clinic and build a high-powered team. High-powered teams share similar values. Their values are no better or worse than any other team. However, a similar set of values allows people to work and grow together in harmony and with mutual respect and support.