Leading the practice to greater success

By Roger P. Levin DDS

“A man’s got to know his limitations.” — Clint Eastwood in “Magnum Force”

Most dentists are overachievers. That’s how you got to be where you are. But to reach your practice potential, you can’t do it alone. You need a strong team to help take your practice to the next level as well. You need to work through your team—not around them. Based on more than 22 years of experience consulting to thousands of practices, Levin Group has determined that to take the practice to the next level, you need to take your leadership skills to the next level as well.

Levin Group teaches that there are five stages of leadership:

1. The Beginning Leader
2. The Competent Leader
3. The Overworked Leader
4. The Smart Leader
5. The Strategic Leader

The Beginning Leader

The beginning leader has strong clinical skills, but is not experienced in running a practice. He or she has no systems in place, and is “winging it” as far as running the practice is concerned. This phase typically lasts for one to three years. Everyone starts as a beginning leader.

The Competent Leader

The competent leader has been in practice for a few years and has settled into a routine. A doctor reaches this level by virtue of working and learning through experience. This is the stage where the doctor begins building the practice, setting the stage for future success.

The Overworked Leader

The overworked leader is “maxed out.” This phase often begins around the fourth or fifth year of practice and continues until retirement. It is not a good place to be. The dentist usually finds that the business side of the practice—not the clinical aspects—is creating most of the stress and frustration. In addition to working too hard, the doctor is typically earning significantly below his or her potential. Unfortunately, many dentists spend the majority of their careers in this phase.

The Smart Leader

This is the level where you want to be. You will be earning more and leading a much less stressful life. In Level 4, the doctor becomes less involved in administrative areas of the practice and focuses more on productive clinical care and referral management.

However, in order to reach this level, dentists routinely use the help of expert advisors who will work with the practice to implement updated systems and train the team to effectively use those systems. Advisors are often called upon to assist doctors with other aspects of their lives, including financial and retirement planning.

The Strategic Leader

This level is not for dentists, but for Fortune 500 CEOs—those leaders who act as a resource but do not perform the day-to-day work. Most dentists love what they do and want to practice their profession. Because dentists provide most of the care in the practice, they really shouldn’t aspire to Level 5. However, there will be times when you will want to function at this level for a small portion of your day. For example, when you are defining your vision and working with your team to set goals, you are acting as a strategic leader. Doing so is a worthwhile endeavor and can take your practice to a higher level of productivity.

Becoming a better leader

Most dentists pursue levels two and three, but the majority of doctors get stuck at Level 3 for a few years and can continue until retirement. It means that your practice is busy, efficient, and you are making a reasonable living. However, Level 3 can be a highly inefficient way to practice dentistry, and it will gradually wear you down. Underproduction, fatigue, frustration, boredom, and dissatisfaction with the team are all symptoms of Level 3. If you do not move beyond this level, your practice will encounter decreased profitability, reduced production and increased stress.

Level 3 leaders usually take eight to 10 years longer to reach financial independence.

Going from Level 3 to Level 4 leadership is a process that allows the practice to increase production and profitability while significantly decreasing stress. Level 4 leadership means the doctor is doing something that could be done by either another staff member or even someone outside the office. As seen with our clients, Level 4 leadership means the doctor is moving toward spending 98% of his or her time in direct patient care or working with referring doctors, resulting in maximum productivity, maximum production and maximum profitability.

Level 4 is achieved by working through others. Some may mistake working through others as delegating. When you delegate, you tell team members what to do and make sure that they understand it, you give them a deadline, and then you assess how they accomplished the task. This, of course, is better than doing it yourself, but it can still be a lot of work. Working through others is permanent. Your staff members are empowered not micromanaged—they are given the total job and are trusted to perform it competently. This allows them to accomplish their tasks and frees you up to stay chair-side providing patient care.

You want to get to Level 4 because Level 5 is an uncomfortable place to live. The journey to Level 4 leadership often requires the aid of outside experts for dentists to reach their leadership potential.Updating your systems is a critical step in attaining Level 4. While Levin Group uses a best practices approach and then highly customizes the model for each client, my suggestion is that each system be evaluated. This process will allow the doctor and team to identify how each system can be improved. Once the systems are redesigned, the team must be trained on the new processes and protocols, with responsibilities assigned to the appropriate team member. Strong leadership, in combination with redesigned systems and a motivated team, allows the practice to reach its true potential.

Conclusion

Leadership is about overcoming obstacles to achieve practice success. Levin Group has seen many dentists transform their practices and reach the next level. With the right systems, team training and leadership skills enhancement, you can reach your practice potential.

What is your current leadership level? If you would like to speak (at no cost) with a Levin Group Practice Development Specialist about attaining Level 4 Leadership and creating a more profitable practice, call 888-975-0000 or e-mail your name, phone number, and address to customerservice@levingroup.com with “GP Leadership” in the subject line.

About the author

Dr. Roger P. Levin, DDS, is founder and chief executive officer of Levin Group, Inc., a leading dental practice management consulting firm. For more than 20 years, Levin Group has helped thousands of general dentists and specialists increase their satisfaction with practicing dentistry. Levin Group may be reached at 888.975.0000.