Overcome your No. 1 fear: delegation

By Sally McKenzie, CMD

There is an interesting paradox that occurs in dental practices across the country. On the one hand, you have the doctor in the fully staffed office who is wearing the floor boards thin day-after-day by running here and racing there. The doctor leaves night after night totally exhausted, overworked and stressed out. She (or he) is working and working and working, but just can’t seem to ever get ahead. Talk to the doctor and you’ll learn that there’s just so much to do, it’s impossible to fit it all into an 8-hour or usually 10-hour day. Talk to the staff, and it’s just the opposite. The doctor insists on doing virtually everything herself — from taking medical histories to drafting patient documents. Just think of the day the doctor run like a hamster on a wheel, frantically racing and getting nowhere. The doctor would like to delegate, would like to hire someone, but handing over responsibility for certain tasks is the ultimate struggle, the impossible dream because the dentist just can’t let go. And you know he or she does it better than me,” mindset, or the “if I don’t do it, I’ll lose control” shackles.

There was a time when the staff was enthusiastic about their jobs and bettering the practice, they’ve since settled into the “why make the effort” mentality. The team — if you can call it that — has learned that the doctor won’t be happy unless she does it her way. Summing up how they understand things might sound like this: Don’t do anything unless you’re told. Don’t make a decision on your own. Don’t take the initiative to take on new responsibilities. And, if at all possible, don’t think unless directed to do so.

There are numerous reasons why a doctor is averse to delegation. In some cases, it’s driven by the need to control, in others there’s the issue of being short-staffed, and finally there’s the problem of insufficiently trained employees. Rather than spending a few bucks on continuing education for the team, the dentist just suffers along doing things the inefficient way he’s (or she’s) always done them. In some cases, the dentist may assert that he has tried to delegate, but it wasn’t a good experience. Maybe the dentist doesn’t know how or what to delegate. In fairness, oftentimes the doctor feels a strong sense of responsibility. He may well have built the practice from the ground up and may feel that he must control all aspects of it.

Does any of this sound familiar? If it is, you’re not alone. The failure to delegate is a common trap that many small business owners, particularly dentists, fall into. Because the dentist is the number one “go-to” guy or gal on your team, it’s no wonder you simply drop at the end of the day. And strategic planning? Well, forget that. You’re so busy simply focusing on today and maybe tomorrow that thinking about the future a few months down the road is impossible. Consequently, your practice and your career remain stuck.

Stop spinning your wheels

For the practice to grow and truly succeed, the doctor simply must accept that power and control have to be shared. In other words, you cannot do it all.

So how do you bring yourself to relinquish a few of those tightly held responsibilities?

First, you have to be ready. Take a close look at what you really want out of your dental practice. Why are you stressed out, maxed out, and feeling as though you are never going to get ahead, you’ve probably reached #1. Now you’re ready to make some changes. Next, accept the fact that the process of relinquishing control will, at times, be a difficult experience, but it will worthwhile in the long run.

The fact is that when it is handled correctly, delegation actually can be a strengthening control because it is about directing the players on your team, identifying the desired outcomes, and creating systems of accountability to realize those outcomes. Delegating duties doesn’t mean abdicating authority. Rather, it’s a means of effectively maximising all that you and your team have to offer. And it begins with a series of carefully planned steps.

Step #1 Identify which duties to give away and which responsibilities to keep. I suggest you conduct your own time-motion study. Carry a notepad with you for three to five days and write down everything you do relating to your practice — reviewing patient records, talking to patients, directing staff, calling in prescriptions, completing forms, evaluating written materials, ordering supplies, and treating patients, cleaning out the refrigerator, changing the light bulbs, etc.

Step #2 After you’ve gathered your data, assess how you are spending your time. Is your day primarily consumed with activities that are focused on growing your practice — specifically diagnosing and treating patients? Or are you engaged in activities that repeatedly interrupt your primary mission of delivering care? Is your list full of items that only the doctor can do? Or do you have a multitude of duties that the staff, whether it’s the assistant, hygienist, scheduling coordinator, business manager, etc., could and should do? Lastly, are there items on that list that you would be willing to relinquish if you knew they should be outsourced or are the result of lack of technology, inefficient space or broken systems?

Step #3 Identify what written materials will cover during the post-op discussion steps they will need to follow. Tell your assistant exactly what you want her or him to cover with patients. Step #4 After you’ve gathered your data, assess how you are spending your time. Is your day primarily consumed with activities that are focused on growing your practice — specifically diagnosing and treating patients? Or are you engaged in activities that repeatedly interrupt your primary mission of delivering care? Is your list full of items that only the doctor can do? Or do you have a multitude of duties that the staff, whether it’s the assistant, hygienist, scheduling coordinator, business manager, etc., could and should do? Lastly, are there items on that list that you would be willing to relinquish if you knew they should be outsourced or are the result of lack of technology, inefficient space or broken systems?

Step #8 Identify which duties to give away and which responsibilities to keep. I suggest you conduct your own time-motion study. Carry a notepad with you for three to five days and write down everything you do relating to your practice — reviewing patient records, talking to patients, directing staff, calling in prescriptions, completing forms, evaluating written materials, ordering supplies, and treating patients, cleaning out the refrigerator, changing the light bulbs, etc.

Step #9 Determine how you will measure your employees’ ability to carry out their delegated duties. Everyone who is expected to perform a task must know exactly what goals or targets he or she is aiming to hit, and how their performance will be measured.

Step #10 Celebrate your success as a highly functioning team.

Author info

Sally McKenzie, Certified Management Consultant, is a national—known lecturer and author. She is CEO of McKenzie Management, which provides highly successful and proven management services to dentistry and has since 1980. McKenzie Management offers a full line of educational and management products, which are available on its Web Site, www.mckenziemgmt.com. In addition, the company offers a vast array of Practice Enrichment Programs and team training. Ms. McKenzie is the editor of the e-Management newsletter and The Dentist’s Network newsletter sent complimentary to practices nationwide. To subscribe, visit www.mckenziemgmt.com and www.thedentistsnetwork.net. Ms. McKenzie welcomes specific practice questions and can be reached toll free at (877) 777-6151 or at sallymck@ mckenziemgmt.com.