The dental office manager’s role in a practice transition

By Domenick Lobifaro

Much like a conductor is to an orchestra, a dental office manager is critical in the operations of a dental practice. He or she helps bring all the different aspects of a dental practice into one unified element. The dental office manager wears many different hats and is talented in the area of multi-tasking.

On any given day, an office manager’s duties can range from dealing with a patient billing issue to calling the credit card processor repair man to fix the credit card machine while simultaneously meeting and scheduling patients.

Office managers play an integral part in managing a dental practice. The dental office manager is usually the first and last person to meet and greet the patient and should do so with a pleasant smile no matter what critical emergency exists at that moment. The manager is the dentist’s front line and, in many ways, sets the tone of the office for both patients and staff.

During a transition, in a scenario where a young dentist purchases a practice from a retiring dentist, the role of a dental office manager becomes even more crucial.

In an interview with Stacey Weinman, a dental office manager in Westfield, N.J., Weinman revealed that during the practice transition she experienced, the biggest challenge was managing change from both the staff’s perspective as well as the patient’s perspective.

In general, people don’t appreciate sudden change. The office staff would like things to stay the same, especially if they’ve been with the practice for a number of years. They expect their salaries and benefits to stay the same, their hours to be unchanged and, most of all, they want to feel that their jobs are secure.

Weinman went on to say that one hurdle she helped overcome was having the staff switch their payroll frequency from weekly to bi-weekly. Despite this appearing to be a minor change in the eyes of the new management, it was, in fact, a big deal for the staff.

Weinman was able to use her strong communication skills to effectively explain to the staff the reason for the change and the steps the dentist would take to assist in alleviating the financial hardship it may cause. Within a few weeks, the staff had become accustomed to their new pay frequency and there were no complaints about it.

From a patient’s standpoint, having a new dentist is a significant change, therefore extra care should be taken to ensure that the level of service is unaltered and that it is “business as usual.” This does not imply that there shouldn’t be any changes. The key is to manage the change in a way that the patients feel comfortable and embrace it.

Charlotte Leone, a dental office manager in Chicopee, Mass., said that during a practice transition she was involved in about a year ago, the former dentist performed all the patient hygiene. The new dentist felt that performing hygiene was not the best use of his time so he hired a hygienist. Before their appointments, Leone contacted the patients and communicated that a new hygienist would perform their next cleaning instead of the dentist.

By the time they were seated in the chair at their appointment, the patients were excited about being seen by their new hygienist. Leone’s technique of using her communication skills and providing ample notice to the patients proved to be successful in managing the change effectively so that the patients were at ease.

During a transition, the dental office manager is normally the one to help the new dentist understand the culture of the practice and act as the liaison between the dentist and the office staff.

He or she must be the eyes and ears of the dentist and must continue to assist the dentist in maintaining a well-organized, cost-effective practice by handling the day-to-day operations and allowing the dentist to focus mainly on the dentistry aspect of the business.

The dental office manager must oversee the personnel issues, handle payment and billing duties, maintain accurate and complete patient records and help the office run smoothly and effortlessly over-all so that the staff can perform their jobs well.

In many cases, the dental office manager is the solid stake in the ground everyone can depend on during the uncertain period of practice transition when many a variety of changes are at hand.

Especially during the first year in practice, the dental office manager plays a major role in determining whether the new dentist will be successful.

When the transition period is over, this vital member of the dental team can then put even more of his/her focus on helping the new dentist to grow the practice.

About the author

Domenick Lobifaro is the managing tax director of LLI Advisory Group, which is composed of certified public accountants and business advisors. For more than 17 years, he has provided tax, accounting and business consulting services to high net-worth individuals and closely held businesses with a concentration in health care.

Formerly a tax manager at Rothstein Kass, he has extensive experience in corporate, partnership and individual taxation. Lobifaro and his firm serve as the independent public accountants for the American Association of Dental Office Managers, www.dentalmanagers.com.