Is personality causing a ‘disorder’ in your practice?

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

It is an unfortunate irony: survey a group of dentists and many of them will tell you that they chose this profession because they grew up enjoying working with their hands.

Or perhaps they genuinely wanted to help people, and probably they always loved science. Maybe they knew they wanted a medical career, but didn’t want the physician’s way of life.

There are a number of very good reasons why people choose to enter dentistry. However, few would say they entered the field because their No. 1 desire in life was to spend day after day talking to people.

Even fewer would say they got into the profession because they wanted to be in charge of a dozen staff members or wanted to worry about making money or selling cases or dealing with an unhappy patient now and then.

The fact is that the art and science of dentistry attracts certain types of individuals, and most entered the profession to simply “do the dentistry.” Yet, once there, they quickly discover there is far more to succeeding in this profession than being an expert clinician.

There is considerably more to being the leader of the team than being the one who signs the checks. In addition, when it comes to working with people, it is far more difficult than anyone ever imagines.

No one prepared you for the inter-personal tilts that wear away your energy or the battles that take on a life of their own or the wars that cause you to consider walking away from your profession and never returning.

“Sure, everyone’s different — but can’t we all just get along?” laments one road-weary dentist after another.

However, over the years, studies have shown those little “personality conflicts” can metamorphose into all-out wars leaving collateral damage rivaling that of history’s major battles.

Personalities: Plus or problem?

What exactly is this unwieldy thing called personality? There are a variety of traits and every person’s personality is composed of a combination of 16 categories. While people are different due to their upbringing and life’s experiences, their basic personality will fit into one of the 16 categories.

Introduced personality types, for example, enjoy spending time alone. They need to have quiet time for concentration and dislike being interrupted by the telephone.

They can work on one project for a long time without any interruption and can have trouble remembering

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Introverted dentists also are not comfortable giving verbal feedback to employees, which is essential in addressing performance issues and management system shortfalls.

Moreover, introverted dentists also have low case acceptance rates because they are unable to clearly articulate patient needs. They don’t naturally engage in conversation so they are less likely to ask patients about dental wants. This difficulty in communication takes its toll on the practice, and there is often a struggle to reach practice goals that can unintentionally make staff members come across as uncaring and aloof to patients.

Consider Dr. Goodfellow. He is an excellent clinician who loves the profession of dentistry, but he absolutely will not do anything else during a hygiene check except a hygiene check. Why? Because Dr. Goodfellow is an introverted dentist and he really just wants to get back to the patient he was pulled away from.

The hygiene patient in the chair, who’s been staring at her discolored teeth for years and is tired of them, wanted to ask about veneers but has no opportunity. Dr. Goodfellow doesn’t ask questions. He offers no suggestions, such as, “Ms. Sutherland, have you ever considered whitening or veneers?”

He doesn’t offer the slightest hint that he has a moment more to spend on this patient. He is on the “check and charge” path: check the patient, tell him/her all looks good and charge right back out that door. Yet, Dr. Goodfellow doesn’t understand why new patient numbers aren’t higher or why production isn’t better.

Opposite of introverted personalities are the extroverted. Extroverts love talking to people and being with people. Extroverts like variety and action in their jobs and are sometimes impatient with long, slow jobs. They enjoy talking, sometimes too much, and generally would prefer to communicate by talking rather than writing. It is not uncommon for extroverted dentists to run behind schedule.

Introvert vs. extrovert: Let the games begin!

The typical misunderstandings between extroverts and introverts can be a source of ongoing conflict in dental practices. Introverts seem to understand why these extroverts are boisterous.

Yet extroverts cannot seem to comprehend why their introverted colleagues don’t enjoy talking and being around people to the extent that extroverts do. As a result, extroverts can fall into the trap of looking at introverts as if there is something wrong with them. “What’s her problem?”

Introverts can come across to extroverts as being snobbish. Similarly, introverted clinicians often come across as moody. They may be short in their answers because they do not like to engage in conversation longer than is necessary and are not interested in openly sharing the reasons why they don’t feel good or are not happy.

Because of introverts’ desire not to communicate outwardly, they have a difficult time in dentistry overall. Extroverts who work with them often are trying to figure them out and understand what’s going on. Extroverts may perceive the office as being tense and feel as though they are walking on eggshells.

In some cases, the difficulties of the clinician are further compounded by the fact that these dentists have a tendency to hire employees with similar personalities. Introverted dentists are more comfortable with introverted staff members who, like themselves, don’t care to talk all the time. Unfortunately, this general aversion to communication can spell trouble for the practice.

The overall lack of communication not only affects treatment acceptance, it also has a powerful impact on team dynamics and the ability of the office to maximize the talents of the staff. To achieve the level of success that these dentists want and are capable of requires that they learn some extroverted behaviors.

“She doesn’t care’ vs. ‘he’s too emotional’

Another dimension of personality are the “thinking” and “feeling” types. Other than the extroverts and introverts, this is the second greatest source of conflict among dental teams. This dimension relates to how people make decisions.

The thinking type will make an objective impersonal decision whereas the feeling type will make an emotional decision. The thinking type is usually very analytical and considers all the evidence before making a decision about something even if that decision is not pleasant.

On the other hand, feeling types make a decision based on how they feel about something. They are exactly as the word describes, “feeling.” They are usually very warm and compassionate, much different than the thinking types.

Thinking types are “bottom-line” people and call things as they see it. As
a result, they can hurt a person’s feel- ings but are totally unaware they have done so. Fairness is extremely impor- tant to thinking types. They are able to step back from a situation, analyze it for what it is and apply an impersonal solution.

Thinking types can come across as heartless, insensitive and uncaring because they naturally see all the flaws in situations and are seemingly very critical. Thinking types are usually motivated by a desire for achieving goals and accomplishments. They also feel it is more important to tell the truth than be tactful.

Feeling types: harmony at any price
Feeling types like harmony and will work very hard to make this happen. They will tend to be sympathetic toward other co-workers, even if those co-workers are not performing to practice expectations, and they need plenty of feedback and praise from employers.

They consider it important to be tactful. They dislike telling people unpleasant things and have an inner desire to please everybody. They can come across to others as appearing weak and emotional.

Thinking type dentists generally have better managed dental practices from the business standpoint. Their strengths lie in efficiently run systems and analyzing a situation if it starts to break down.

On the other hand, depending on the types of employees they are working with, they can have poor relationship- ships with the team, especially if many staff members are feeling types.

Thinking types tend to voice only their discontent because giving praise does not typically come naturally for them. They feel that doing so will come across as fake to the employ- ee. Yet, all employees need feedback, direction and guidance regardless of their personality type — even thinking types.

However, for feeling type employ- ees — and this temperament type tends to be most attracted to dentistry — they can be crushed by a thinking-type dentist’s tendency to only find fault and never give praise. Feeling type employees need praise regularly to help them achieve maximum per- formance.

Thinking type dentists can also turn this firm and tough-minded attitude toward patients too. “You know I’ve been telling you for two years this tooth was going to break. We could have done a crown and saved it, now I don’t know if that’s going to be pos- sible.”

Conversely, the feeling type dentists will be apologizing and agonizing over the fact that their treatment plan is going to cost upwards of $5,000, so they’ll present it then hurry up and tell the patient that they can pay $50 a month for the next five years. Feeling type dentists usually have high patient bases because of their strong warmth and compassion.

However, case acceptance may be low because they are uncomfortable telling patients things that they feel are unpleasant, and their accounts receiv- ables are often high.

Dentistry requires certain param- eters to be successful and every dentist and dental team needs to know and understand itself as well as others in the practice. Explore personality assessments such as the Keirsey Tem- perament Sorter in the book “Please Understand Me”.

In doing so, you will gain a far bet- ter understanding of yourself and each other. You’ll understand much more clearly why you work the way you do and how to maximize your personality strengths and address the weaknesses.

Surround yourself with employees whose temperament types comple- ment yours but are not necessarily the opposite.

Moreover, even though a dentist or a staff member may not fit exactly into a specific personality type that is considered ideal for certain positions, those willing to pursue additional training and improve communication skills can often make huge strides in achieving their professional goals and dreams.

For additional information on personality types and how they affect practices, visit www.mckenzie mgmt.com.

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