Trust in uncertain times

Changing our behaviour and creating a high-trust environment in the workplace, leads to greater productivity and will help to retain and attract patients, says Dr Elaine Halley

During these months of economic instability, it is important to become familiar with the predicted doom and gloom, and worried that patients may hold back on making decisions about elective dentistry, such as cosmetic or implant work.

One of the main factors involved in the patient’s decision-making process is trust. When your patient trusts in your diagnosis, and do they also trust you to be the dentist who carries out the work for them. Our existing patients generally have a much higher level of trust with us – as they return to visit the hygiene department and receive dentistry, there is time for a relationship to develop. New patients however, do not yet have that level of trust, although there are significant steps that can be taken to speed up the time it takes to develop trust. This is particularly important if your patients come to you for single courses of treatment, for example, walk the talk. The second is intent of purpose, in other words, your intension is in alignment with your actions and values, and there is no ulterior motive you keep hidden. This reflects back to the earlier statement – you can’t have trust without trustworthiness. If your intent of purpose is not in alignment with the words you are speaking, others will detect it even if they are not entirely sure what in particular they are uneasy about.

A joint effort

The first principle of trust according to Dr Stephen Covey, author of Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, is that “You cannot have trust without trustworthiness”. This is a natural law. Of course, there exists deceit and unscrupulous behaviour, but the truth will be discovered. It is well worth reiterating – you cannot have trust without trustworthiness.

Stephen Covey (son of Dr Stephen Covey who wrote a book, called Speed of Trust where he talks about many aspects of trust and how it affects our relationships at home and in the workplace, many of which are applicable to the trust we are building every day with our patients.

Consider the workplace or the practice team. Imagine the difference between working in a high-trust environment versus a low-trust one. How would it feel to come to work every day to an atmosphere of trust among work colleagues, compared with one of distrust and suspicion? In addition, how much more efficient in obtaining results would a high-trust organisation be in comparison to a low-trust one? Numerous studies have variously shown that organisations increase the speed of delivery of results while decreasing costs.

The attributes of a trustworthy individual can be split into four areas, two pertaining to character and two to competence. The first area is that of integrity; meaning you do as you say, you live by your beliefs and values, for example, walk the talk. The second is intent of purpose, in other words, your intention is in alignment with your actions and values, and there is no ulterior motive you keep hidden. This reflects back to the earlier statement – you can’t have trust without trustworthiness. If your intent of purpose is not in alignment with the words you are speaking others will detect it even if they are not entirely sure what in particular they are uneasy about.

Benefits of trust

Individuals who demonstrate both integrity and intent of purpose do so by means of the following behaviours: straight talking, respect for others, transparency, making restitution when mistakes are made and showing loyalty. Nobody is perfect, and in dentistry as well as all walks of life, despite the best intentions, mistakes will be made. A trustworthy team or individual will own up to the mistake and apologise and go some way towards righting the wrong. They will not try to cover up mistakes or utilise blame to cover their tracks.

In terms of competency, a trustworthy individual must be capable of doing the job, for example, have had the correct training, but also must deliver the results and live up to the level of training with the results actually delivered. The behaviours which demonstrate competency are delivering results, seeking continual improvement, facing or confronting reality, clarifying expectations and holding themselves and others accountable. In the dental profession, we have a requirement to continually update our professional development, and it can be useful to communicate our commitment to education to our patients. For example, in furthering our skills in cosmetic dentistry, we can demonstrate commitment to competency and excellence by joining the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry and pursuing the Accreditation pathway. Further training that measures our results against high standards is an excellent tool to not only improve our clinical skills but also build trust with our patients.

Winning over cynics

There’s a lot we can learn when it comes to building trust with our patients. For example, in case presentation – having examples of our own before-and-after photographs can show how we deliver results. In the same way, testimonials from happy patients provide evidence of our capability and results. This is the fastest way to win over cynics. Clarifying the expectations of our patients lends itself to have a chance of being able to meet them. And don’t forget, seek first to understand before being understood. In other words, take the time to listen first. This is exactly what we do when we are diagnosing. If we didn’t first listen to the symptoms and expectations of our patients, we would be in danger of misdiagnosing.

Staying committed

The final two behaviours identified in trustworthy individuals, are those of making and keeping commitments, and extending trust to others. Making and keeping commitments no matter how small, is a measure of whether or not you can be counted on. An individual who is overly distrustful can waste a lot of energy double-checking and being suspicious, and this in turn will reduce the trust that is extended to them.

Dr Elaine Halley

qualified from the University of Edinburgh and has been clinically practicing dentistry since 1992. She set up her practice, Cherrybank Dental Spa in Perth, Scotland, in 1995. She lectures on subjects ranging from clinical excellence, to leadership and practice management. Her blend of experience combined with her own lead-ership in the UK dental commu-nity commend her as a proven dental professional with timely insights into the day-to-day and fiscal operations of a dental practice. Visit www.westenddentist.com.

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