Letting off steam, but not boling over

Roger Levin looks at useful steps to keeping control of stress in the workplace, and how successful stress management can benefit team morale in so many ways

What's the leading cause of stress? Is it even possible to pinpoint one cause when so many variables operate in busy dental practices? It's

safe to say that every dental practice experiences too much stress at one time or other. Some practices accept it as a fact of life, while others want something better. For them, total success includes having a low-stress practice.

Levin Group consultants have observed that stress usually results from a combination of factors. The most common problems are a lack of well-defined business systems, ineffective leadership skills and teams that are not as committed as they should be. All of these issues can be solved. The final result is a low-stress practice, which is the goal of every dentist who has ever gone into practice.

The Levin Group Method for Total Practice Success includes five steps clinicians can take to have an immediate and positive impact on stress:

1) Empower the team
2) Hold morning meetings
3) Revise the schedule
4) Improve communication
5) Become a better leader

Empower the team
The clinician's best resource for reducing inefficiency and lowering stress is the dental team. Involve as many team members as possible in examining your systems. Everyone on the team will have valuable insights to contribute. Special staff meetings can be held to review the major systems such as scheduling, case presentation, hygiene, practice financial management and patient finance. Some strategies include:

• Ask team members to bring a list of 10 possible improvements to the next staff meeting.

• Organise an off-site, all-day retreat to focus on current issues and strategic planning for the practice. This approach creates an opportunity to bring people together, forge a team spirit and identify problem areas and solutions.

• Send your practice manager to regularly scheduled continuing education courses to gain new perspectives and ideas on dental management.

Task the practice manager with the project of creating a written operations manual for every major business system in the practice. These manuals must include a step-by-step analysis of each system so that a person not trained in dentistry can quickly learn how the practice operates by following the manuals.

Hold morning meetings
Once the team has been empowered, it is a valuable asset to have a daily morning meeting. Conducting morning meetings before patients arrive is a sure-fire method of proactively organising the day and minimising stress. During these meetings, the clinician and the
team must identify times during the day when:

- Emergencies can be seen
- Time crunches are likely to occur
- New patients will need extra attention from the dentist
- Any special situations may affect the day

Making preparations for what's ahead on a given day will greatly reduce stress in the practice.

Revise the schedule

The backbone of the practice is the schedule, and it affects nearly every aspect of practice operations. Poorly constructed schedules can have chaotic results—frustrated patients, cancelled appointments, lost production and a stressful work environment for the staff. When this situation is left uncorrected, the practice risks losing good team members, thus creating even more stress for the remaining staff.

Examine how your practice schedule is constructed. For example, are there too many holes in the schedule? That's a sign that appointments are spaced too far apart. This scenario increases stress for the dentist and the team.

Levin Group recommends to its clients Power Cell Scheduling, a high-performance scheduling system using 10-minute units to accurately schedule appointments and allow more scheduling flexibility. Fifteen-minute units can result in under- or over-scheduling patients.

For example, if a procedure takes 20 minutes, the practice using 15-minute units would have to schedule this as a 15-minute or a 50-minute appointment.

From one day to the next, the schedule's format should be very similar. Mornings should be reserved for longer, higher-revenue procedures that make up most of the day's production goal. Afternoons can then be scheduled with simpler procedures. Within this framework the dentist and dental team are less stressed. This type of schedule keeps everyone on a steady, but not overwhelming, pace while allowing the practice to meet daily production goals.

Improve communication

Look at any successful practice and you will see an office that communicates extremely well. Communication affects every aspect of the patient experience, ranging from scheduling an appointment to case acceptance. For the dentist, the first step in improving communication is cultivating clear, positive and well-understood interactions with team members.

Throughout the day, the dentist has opportunities to coach team members, respond to questions and concerns, and motivate the team. Dentists should be providing positive feedback to team members throughout the day. Don't wait to recognize good performance until a staff meeting. When team members perform well, tell them that day.

Clear communication and supportive coaching become more critical as the practice grows. The dentist needs to inspire team members, individually and collectively, to achieve the highest levels of success.

Become a better leader

A mismanaged practice is a stressful place to work. Efficiency, productivity and communication are all reflections of your leadership skills. Therefore, dentists who work to improve their leadership skills can measurably reduce the stress in their practices.

Good leaders have learned to work through their teams—not around them. The most successful dentists have figured out how to delegate responsibilities to team members. Delegating responsibility accomplishes two things: dentists reduce their stress and team members gain a sense of empowerment. Staff members want to feel they play an important part in practice success.

Leading by example is another facet of leadership. Team members learn how to act by watching the leader's behavior. A dentist who is positive and motivational inspires team members to act in the same way. Lead the way and your team will be sure to follow!

Conclusion

Chronic stress indicates that some vital elements of leadership are underdeveloped on the clinician's part. Dentists can remedy this situation by taking more proactive measures as leaders of their practices. Team members are relying on the dentist to set the tone, solve problems and identify strategies to get control of problem areas that are sources of stress.

Yet paradoxically, dentists who are working to become good leaders learn to empower their teams as much as possible. Dentists become better leaders by tapping into team member's insights, abilities and skills. These five steps can help dentists become better leaders, build better teams and achieve total success.

About the author

Dr Roger P Levin is founder and chief executive officer of Levin Group, Inc, a dental practice-management consulting firm that provides a comprehensive suite of lifetime services to its clients and partners. Since 1985, Levin Group has embraced one single mission—to improve the lives of dentists. 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 customerservice@levingroup.com.