The 10th Dimension

The power of ten

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Ten Steps to Managing Change

How can you love what changes too swiftly; Too swiftly changes and changes again?... This place owes too little to time, Too much to appetite and rage and guilty self—contempt— Reaps and tears itself... renews... renews. (Lionel Abrahams, South African poet)

As in almost every other aspect of modern life, dentistry is changing at an electrifying pace. Examples of change within the dental profession are:

- the advent of corporate bodies controlling individual practices
- the new NHS contract
- bidding for service provision
- rewarding staff with bonuses
- using hygienists for expanded duties
- embracing marketing and sales promotion
- becoming patient-centred rather than dentist-centred
- the development of aesthetic and cosmetic dentistry alongside restorative practice
- the transition from conventional analogue to digital technology
- the growth of an awareness of the role of the body in oral health
- viewing dentistry as a business as well as a profession
- the development of aesthetic and cosmetic dentistry alongside restorative practice
- becoming patient-centred rather than dentist-centred
- embracing marketing and sales promotion
- using hygienists for expanded duties
- rewarding staff with bonuses rather than salary raises.

These are all things unimaginable thirty years ago. Unfortunately, many practices remain where they were thirty years ago. For some adapting to change comes easily, for others it can be very daunting. Change management is the newest branch of behavioural science, and we need to understand it.

How one adapts to change will answer the question “What’s in it for me?” For practice owners, managers and staff, change will only be welcomed if a clear benefit is perceived. If not, the likelihood is that it will be resisted, for change drags in its wake fear, uncertainty and doubt. There are practical steps that can be taken to manage change successfully, but remember that effective change management is about people as well as projects.

1. To manage change successfully one has to enrol others into sharing the same goals, and to make them believe that the extra effort and risk involved will bring them the same perceived benefits. Begin with extensive communication of your aims, objectives and goals.

2. Be firm on goals, flexible on means. Set expectations early, but remember that there are many ways to skin a cat, if the cat must be skinned.

3. Let your staff know well in advance what changes you want to make, what you want to achieve, and why. Surprises are not a good idea. Resistance will be highest from those with most to lose, and it is best to get their fears out of the way before the process begins.

4. Focus on what the benefits will be for them. Achieving objectives will have benefits not only for the organisation but for the individuals working within it as well: better salaries or bonuses, job satisfaction, self-actualisation.

5. Do not attempt too much too soon. Break the project down into bite-sized incremental chunks. Keep your staff within their comfort zone.

6. Commence with a relatively simple task, one with a high likelihood of a positive outcome. Success motivates to do more. People will climb aboard a moving band-wagon.

7. Like elastic bands, staff should be stretched, but not broken. Change takes people out of their comfort zone, and this can be heartbreaking. Avoid projects with a low likelihood of success.

8. Once the process is underway, focus on the positive things that each person achieves. Recognition of positive achievements builds confidence.

9. Navigate around obstacles. Trying to ride over them can be very frustrating and wastes essential energy resulting in lost momentum. Flexibility of thinking may bring up more attractive, alternative solutions.

10. Maintain a positive attitude throughout, and avoid letting those with negative attitudes trap you into their way of thinking. Change is not a journey with a beginning and end point. It is ongoing, and therefore requires continuing reassessment and evaluation.

Managing change requires effort, and brings rewards for all if successfully accomplished. On the other hand, failure to achieve objectives is a damaging experience for all, but mostly for the leader.

Recommended reading:

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