Consider your team for a moment. Does the thought cause you to roll your eyes and sigh in despair? Some days they’re good, other days they’re so-so, and on the worst days they are just plain bad. But they are your team.

Most of the time they show up when they’re supposed to and together you take care of the patients. So you simply accept what you consider to be the trials and tribulations of people working together day after day. But what if you could take the good days and double, if not triple, those? What if you could build on the strengths of each individual? What if each person could realize their potential and contribute to work and contributing fully? What if you could make all this team cooperation, and team performance, part of your practice? Maybe it’s time to turn those ‘what ifs’ into realities. Read on.

We spend a lot of time talking about dental teams — their effectiveness, their cohesiveness, their efficiency, their productivity, etc. Google the word ‘teamwork’ and you’ll get 25.5 million hits. Search for books on teamwork on Amazon.com and you’ll find nearly 59 thousand to choose from. For all of our interest in teams — dynamics, operations, advantages and disadvantages, the challenge is largely in the Neanderthal stage in its evolution, still lumbering along. As Ken Lencioni, leadership guru and author of the best-selling book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,* describes it, ‘Teamwork remains the one sustainable competitive advantage that has been largely untapped.’

What’s more ‘teams’ are frequently composed of individuals whose skills are vastly under-utilised. According to Richard Hackman, author of *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performance,* most teams generally leave unemployed enormous pools of member talent.

Many dental teams struggle to truly maximise their effectiveness. They face the daily challenge of merely getting everyone on the same page let alone bringing in the same direction. Often they simply avoid taking action necessary to create high performance teams. Dentists become frustrated with team members because they don’t like the way employees handle certain procedures, tasks, or patient interactions, yet they routinely make excuses for those individuals rather than give constructive direction. ’Patty is new, so there’s a learning curve we have to consider.’ ‘Ellen is great at what she does, but she has difficulty dealing with some people.’ ‘Joe is a really nice guy, but he’s afraid to mention a problem until we have a crisis.’

Conversely, team members complain that dentists don’t give enough direction, feedback, or refuse to hold others accountable. They’ll assert that dentists need to give more feedback, or preferential treatment or that the office politics interfere with any real effort to improve systems. Some team members will become immensely frustrated with their inability to fix what they see as a problem or inefficiency because the practice has ‘always done it this way.’ Others shun discussion of those issues that make fellow team members or the doctor uncomfortable for fear of making waves.

Workgroup or teamwork

Take a look at your practice environment. Is your office fostering a culture of teamwork that is built on trust and respect or does it operate more like a workgroup? Many dental teams’ function more like workgroups. In workgroups, people are primarily concerned with their own job and output. They have little or no interest in what their coworkers are doing. In fact, they see their coworkers as their competition. This ineffective attitude leads to a loss of efficiency and production. The office feels disorganised; there is a general acceptance of poor or mediocre performance, a ‘that’s just the way things operate here,’ attitude, and high turnover is common. Worse yet, conflict, turf wars, and pettiness are all too frequent.

In this type of environment, it is not uncommon for the doctor to discuss the value of taking steps to strengthen the dental team. They’ll dismiss or belittle the concept of ‘team’ with comments such as, ‘My staff and I work pretty well together, and I don’t want to spend time on intangibles.’ Intangibles? An ineffective team costs time, money, patients, staff, and stress — five tangible things, wouldn’t you say.

Answer the following questions about your team:

• How many times during the past year did you wish a member of your team would handle a patient, a procedure, or a situation differently? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How often did you think it cost your practice?

• How often did you feel one or more members of your team were heading in the opposite direction of the rest of the group? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How often were you frustrated by team members’ inability to solve problems or take necessary action? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How often were staff meetings either dead with silence or dominated by one or two people? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How many good ideas surfaced but were never implemented? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How many times did you hear the words ‘It’s not my job?’ Or thought was Jane’s responsibility? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How often were you faced with a two-weeks notice? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How many patients did you lose in the last 12 months? How much do you think it cost your practice?

• How many times did you feel like the practice should be doing better financially, that work should be less stressful and more rewarding? How much do you think it cost your practice?

And, most importantly, use job descriptions to give employees the direction they need to carry out their duties effectively. Employee job descriptions are essential to clearly articulate exactly what is expected and why carrying out specific duties is essential both to the individual’s success and that of the practice.

In addition to clearly explaining duties and expectations, talk to your employees. Give them feedback regularly. Catch your employees doing something right and tell them every day. Ongoing feedback is absolutely essential in any business environment, but in a small business, particularly a dental practice, in which the success for failure of each system hinges on the efforts of a small collection of employees, it is critical. Feedback from the doctor and other members of the team is the only means individuals have to better understand what they can do to improve their own performance. And it’s one of the most essential resources for continuously assessing what is working and what isn’t in your practice.

Create a culture of teamwork

Team members need to know they can trust each other. They need a process for managing conflict, which is inevitable and occurs on every functioning team. They need to understand what their individual strengths and weaknesses are as well as those of their teammates. Team members need to feel included in the process. They need to feel valued for their contributions, and they need to feel empowered to make decisions and take action when it is in the best interest of the practice.

Team members need to know how to communicate with each other. A true team environment encourages individuals to risk speaking up, ask for help, and it gives them a safety net to make mistakes. It also creates a strong environment for solid constructive feedback. Effective team members turn team priorities into individual priorities. They understand that their role isn’t just limited to their specific tasks, but everyone else as well. Take steps to turn your staff into a highly effective team and enjoy the benefits of significantly greater practice efficiency and effectiveness and far less daily stress and anxiety.

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