How many times during the day do your team members carry out their duties efficiently and effectively? How many good ideas surfaced during last year? How many patients did you lose to other practices? How many times did you feel frustrated by the work of your team members? How often did your team members experience stress and anxiety?

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Dentists become frustrated easily. 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 discuss or debate the concept of ‘team’ with complete misunderstanding. 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 feedback. ‘Patty is new, so there’s a learning curve we have to consider!’ ‘Eileen 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 certain team members get 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. How does your office foster 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.

Workgroups are usually low cost, turf wars, and pettiness are all too frequent. Team dynamics are as well as conflict. 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.

The dental team: Is yours troubled or terrific?

Team members need to know how to communicate with each other. A true team environment encourages individuals to risk speaking up, to 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 teamwork priorities into individual priorities. They understand that their role is not just to themselves, 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.

Effective team fundamentals

Effective teams produce concrete and measurable results. But it doesn’t just happen. Often times, practices have employees that together could become an outstanding, highly effective team. Individually, most of the members are dedicated, hard working, and knowledgeable, but they simply don’t know how to function effectively as a group.

They don’t know how to establish team goals and to identify the strategies to achieve those goals. But show them the possibilities of working as a team and give them the tools to function together, and you’ll be able to build the high performance group.

Start with the fundamentals of the highly functioning team. No. 1: Individuals need direction. And a basic understanding of how their day-to-day work fits into the practice’s overall goals.

That begins with the practice vision and goals coupled with individual objectives. Help each employee understand their specific part in realising the established objectives. Staff members who are able to see the relationship between their roles and practice goals are much more effective and far more motivated to succeed than those who feel they are just another cog in the wheel.

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 dentist 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. You 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.

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About the author

Sally McKenzie is CEO of The McKenzie Company, Inc., a nationwide dental management, practice development and educational consulting firm. McKenzie Management provides educational, guidance and person-