The dental team: Is yours troubled or terrific?

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 have a positive attitude, enjoy their work and contributing fully? What if you could make all this team work?

Early in my practice I used to try to build and run a team. But it was no easy task in those days. You see, a team is the sum total of all the individuals that make it up. Each of us has our own personal attitudes, skills, experience and interests. Yet to have a high performing working team, you need to have individuals who can and will combine to work together harmoniously.

Change is the only constant. 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 find 25.5 million hits. Search for books on teamwork on Amazon.com and you’ll find nearly 39 thousand to choose from. For all of our interest in teams — dynamics, operations, advantages, that challenges, the team is largely in the Neanderthal stage in its evolution, still lumbering along.

What’s more ‘teams’ are frequently composed of individuals whose skills are vastly under-utilised. According to I. Richard Hackman, author of ‘Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances,’ most teams generally leave un-used 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 being 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 certain team members demand 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 networked? 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.

Worse yet, conflict, turf wars, and pettiness are all too frequent.

In this type of environment, it is not uncommon for the doctor to discipline the various members of the team. They’ll dismiss or belittle the concept of a 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 many times during the year were you managing conflicts between team members? How much do you think it cost your practice?
• How many times did you feel the need to build teamwork 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 phrase, ‘That’s not my job!’ Or ‘I 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?

But just how do you build the team that not only works together but truly excels together? It starts with a clear vision and a solid plan to implement the vision. The team has to know where they’re going before they can be expected to actually travel in the same direction. Success in the office, toward a common purpose and hold themselves and each other accountable for the team’s effectiveness and efficiency.

Choosing the right people is the most important factor in building a high performance team. That begins with the right vision and the right culture.

Build the culture of your organisation. Start with the fundamentals. 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 vision and mission 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 performance of a small collection of employees, it is critical. Feedback from the doctors, 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, 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 team priorities into individual priorities. They understand that their roles may not just improve 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.