**Practice Management**

**Be a better leader**

Y ou can’t do it alone. Many dentists don’t want to admit this, but practice success depends on a team approach. Owning and operating a successful dental practice requires many skills that aren’t taught at dental school. Many new practice owners experience a rude awakening after a few months (weeks or even days) on the job.

Fortunately, today there is a greater awareness of the need for strong leadership skills by dentists at every stage of their careers. Leadership skills are taught as an essential element of the Levin Group Management Consulting Program. Strong leadership allows the dentist to help the staff members become a high-performing effective team despite the challenges faced by growing practices.

Properly exercising leadership skills helps the team understand their responsibilities and accountabilities in the ever-changing practice environment. The following action steps can help you become a better practice leader:

1. Recognise the limitations. There is only so much time in the day. As the chief producer for the practice, you should be spending more than 90 percent of your time involved in direct patient care.

This is where you are most effective and productive. As the CEO of the practice, you need to work through others to accomplish practice goals. Some dentists attempt to be everywhere at once and just end up frustrating themselves and their teams. Recognise that as one person you could do only so much. That’s why your team is so important.

2. Delegate responsibility. To maximise productivity and profitability, you must delegate responsibilities to your team. Le axis Group believes dentists should delegate all tasks that they are not required by law or state board regulations to perform. Although each task in the office has different levels of difficulty and varying deadlines, proper training will help team members learn to perform these functions. By delegating responsibilities, you enable yourself to fully concentrate on the responsibilities that only you can perform, while the staff executes all other tasks.

3. Create a vision for the practice. A vision statement focuses on where you are going and serves as an internal document guiding decision-making. A vision should demonstrate to your team that as a CEO you have a clear understanding of the practice in the next one to five years. It is essential in creating a vision, your team will become more involved in the goals that you are trying to achieve.

4. Coach your office manager and your team. Develop written job descriptions for every team member. Provide continuing education and skill development training courses. Set yearly objectives for your office manager and have regular performance reviews with those objectives in mind. If you coach and empower your team, your manager should be able to handle 99 percent of the issues that occur within her (or his) assigned areas.

Dentists have many opportunities to coach staff, including informal feedback during the workday, formal performance reviews, one-to-one meetings with team members, staff meetings or morning meetings. For the practice to grow and team members to develop, feedback is needed from the doctor. Effective and responsible leadership focuses on positive, specific and practical communication that helps team members grow and excel at their duties.

5. Create a set of documented systems and procedures. Dentistry must incorporate step-by-step systems, as all successful businesses should do. Systems must be documented before they can be successfully integrated into the practice and adopted by the team. Documenting systems forces the team members to focus on the most efficient ways to operate.

The team will quickly realise which steps are necessary and which should be eliminated. These changes can make an incredible difference in employee morale and practice stress levels. Documenting expert systems is the fastest way to train current and new team members.

6. Improve listening skills. Busy work schedules often prevent dentists from communicating with their team members about anything other than patient care. The key to communicating effectively begins with your ability to listen. Recognise that listening is something you do for professional and personal success. Listening earns power, respect and gratitude and builds the information you need to be effective.

7. Be consistent. Team members look to leaders for guidance, calmness and strength – especially during stressful moments. Staff will follow the dentist if they believe that leader knows where he or she is going. This can only occur if the leader displays noticeable levels of strength and confidence.

Emotional consistency is not always easy for a personality trait you adopt. Leaders, by their nature, tend to push the envelope. At times, they are emotional when things do not go as planned. Understanding the true cause of unforeseen obstacles. For team members, it is very destabilising to see their leaders lose their tempers or have significant mood swings. People usually do not like to work for individuals whose temperament is unpredictable.

8. Lead by example. Your behaviour and demeanor affect how your team views the practice. A dentist who is positive, motivated and energetic will transmit those feelings to the team and patients. By observing the dentist’s behavior, the team should understand that the main purpose of dental practice is to create the right environment for patients.

Leadership also requires:

- Maintaining a positive attitude at all times
- Having an open door policy so that people are comfortable talking to you at any time about what is happening in the office
- Challenging people to develop their own solutions in areas where you believe that team members are already proficient and skilled
- Acting as a motivator for your team and reinforcing positive messages on a regular basis
- Providing rewards and fair compensation to let your team members know that they are appreciated

**Conclusion**

Leadership is not one thing, but rather a set of evolving skills. Look at the above action steps and select the ones that can best enhance your leadership abilities in the near-term. Everyone can become a better leader. It takes determination, desire and dedication. Your team is looking to you for inspiration — it’s time to lead the way to greater success!

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**About the author**

Dr. Roger P. Levin, DDS, is founder and chief executive officer of Levin Group, a consulting dental practice management consulting firm. For more than 20 years, Levin Group has helped thousands of general dentists and specialists increase their satisfaction with practicing dentistry.