Be a better leader

You 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 skills allow the dentist to help the staff members become a high-powered, 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. Levin 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 where you are taking the practice in the next three 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 continual education and skill development training courses. Set yearly objectives for your office manager and have regular performance review meetings 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 your respect and builds the relationships 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 an easy personality trait to adopt. Leaders, by their nature, tend to push the envelope. At times, they are emotional and forceful – 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.

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