If it wasn’t for the people...

Dental practices set out planning to have the right staff with the right skills, qualifications, experience and knowledge to look after patients and the practice. Somewhere along the line, things go wrong, be it staff malfunction and emotions run high. When one of my own practice managers has a bad day at the ranch nine out of ten times the complaints are about a team member who did not pull their weight or a process that went wrong which could have been prevented with some pre-planning or effort on the part of a team member.

So what goes wrong? Dental practices are busy places and time is at a premium! There are few other professions where everyone has to be ready from the moment they arrive to the moment they leave. As small businesses, we do not have the capacity to have “floating” staff, receptionists have to answer the phones and nurses are in with patients all day. Any spare time a nurse has is likely to have to be spent on decontamination these days!

All problems therefore end up at the practice manager’s door, who can easily find that fire fighting chews up half of his or her time.

Rebuild your dream team in five simple steps

It’s worth reviewing the processes that are in place for “people management”, to see where things can be improved. A good leader creates vision for the practice and a good manager knows how to implement that vision by selecting appropriate team members for each role, and nurturing their individual strengths.

In many smaller practices the leader’s and manager’s roles overlap, and the owner and manager work closely to implement the vision.

Each time we recruit, we try to get “the right person” but if you feel let down by your team, there are five steps that practice managers can put in place to create the culture that they want within the practice.

STEP 1: Create a team manual

Each time a new team member is recruited, there is potential for miscommunication and disruption to the practice. It is possible to minimise this by taking the time to develop a dedicated staff handbook or team manual as a handy reference tool. This should include day to day operational procedures, code of conduct, practice policies and procedures, health and safety, infection control, information governance and local child protection pathways.

STEP 2: Tighten up on Rotas

Unplanned absence is the bane of every practice manager’s life. Persistent offenders need to be encouraged to take ownership of the disruption caused to patients and the practice, without the practice manager having to turn into an ogre.

Most managers are familiar with PLANNED holiday charts to organise rotas, but try putting up an UN-PLANNED leave chart. Mark planned absence in GREEN and unplanned absence in RED and without saying too much you will find that persistent offenders are embarrassed into mending their ways.

STEP 5: Repeat the mantra - Smiley you’re on stage!

Encourage a culture of accepting that everyone is human but when the team is at work, personal problems are left outside the front door. It is important for the practice to be supportive of individuals with personal problems, when appropriate, but to know how to ensure that they do not impact on patient care.

By taking the time to understand individual strengths and weaknesses, and acknowledging that life outside work can imbalance emotions, practice managers command respect, instead of demanding it.

STEP 4: Re-induce using CQC as your goal

Tell the team that you are getting organised for Care Quality Commission registration, which all practices are affected by from October 2010, and focus on the first two sections – patient information and involvement, and personalisation, care and treatment. Support.

If you are not up to speed on CQC yet, email seema.sharma@dentabyte.co.uk to find out the outcomes that are expected from dental practices.

CQC registration provides a timely reminder that teams should be able to demonstrate:

- Practice culture and values – it is key to ensure team members understand the vision created by the leader of the practice.
- Organisational structure - outline of each team member’s role as an individual and within the team.
- Policies and procedures - tell the team about your new team manual!

STEP 5: Appraise and develop

Staff training needs should be identified and supported, with protected time for learning and development to optimise the team’s skills, happiness, performance and staying power! Ideally a practice should have monthly meetings for clinical governance, training and practice management, to keep the team aligned. The quality of the service being provided by the team should be audited regularly and training arranged to align the skills and work of those who are not on track.

Key tips for practice managers

- Define individual roles
- Create clear job descriptions for all roles
- Ensure advertisements clearly outline the role which the candidate is applying for
- Treat all applicants equally by using template interview forms and processes
- Offer the job in writing and provide written terms and conditions (contracts or licences)
- Conduct thorough pre-employment checks
- If the new staff member has a probationary period, ensure the details are outlined in the offer letter
- Put new staff members through an induction process
- Provide all team members with a staff handbook, team manual outlining practice policies and procedures
- Organise and record all staff training and continuing professional development
- Monitor individual performance
- Conduct annual appraisals for all team members
- Ensure that all team members have personal/professional development plans to maintain and develop their individual skill sets
- Be aware of the human resource legislative frameworks around working times, holidays, rest breaks, disciplinary procedures, stress, disability etc
- Maintain an accurate HR record for each team member

Tomorrow’s Manager

So how does a practice manager fit all this in? Tomorrow’s practice manager needs to learn to work smarter not harder, to run a smooth practice and maximise the team’s potential. Email the author at seema.sharma@dentabyte.co.uk for a job description for the practice manager of the future, then set about developing your skill set.

Your knowledge will translate into an increased bottom line and a stress free practice, your boss will be happy!

Seema Sharma

Seema Sharma qualified as a dentist but gave up clinical work after 10 years in practice to go into full time practice management. Today she runs three practices, including one which is a multi-disciplinary specialist centre. Seema established Dentabyte Ltd to provide affordable “real world” practice management programmes to help practice managers and practice owners keep pace with the changing clinical and commercial environment facing them today. Visit www.Dentabyte.co.uk to register for updates on practice management or email Seema at seema.sharma@dentabyte.co.uk to find out more.