Leadership essentials for the ‘rookie’

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

U pon entering your first “real” dental practice either as an associate or as an owner, with 80 or 90+ percent of you in hand and requisite experience on your resume, it’s likely that one thing became abundantly clear very early on: The learning process had only just begun. There is a whole lot more to a career in dentistry than most young dentists ever imagine.

Almost without warning, many are tossed into leadership roles seemingly overnight. And it’s that part of the job requirement that often leaves new dentists shaking their heads in bewilderment. Certainly, there is a lot to learn as a leader, but here are a few essentials to follow from day one as “The Boss.”

No. 1: Never assume

This is the common pitfall in leading employees: assuming that your staff knows what you want. Spell out your expectations and the employees’ responsibilities in black and white for every member of your team from the beginning. Do not convince yourself that because they’ve worked in this dental practice for X number of years that they know how you want things done. They don’t. And, they will still keep performing their responsibilities according to what they think you want unless they are directed otherwise.

For example, your scheduling coordinator may be very experienced in scheduling according to how other dentists want their days divided up, while in fact, be very different from how you want your days scheduled. Get good employees want clear direction, and it’s tremendously frustrating for everyone when staff are forced to guess at what you want. So speak up.

No. 2: Staff success = your success

Recognize the strengths and weaknesses among your team members because all employees bring both to their positions. The fact is that some people are much better suited for certain responsibilities and not others. Just because Dr. McKenzie has been handling insurance and collections for the practice doesn’t mean she’s effective in those areas. Look at results. Britain may be much more successful at scheduling and recall and would be better suited for those duties. Don’t be afraid to restructure responsibilities to make the most of team strengths. Invest in training early and often to build loyalty and ensure excellence.

No. 5: Give feedback often

Along with clear expectations, direction and guidance, employees crave feedback. Don’t be stingy. Give praise often and appraise performance regularly. Employees want to know where they stand and how they can improve. Verbal feedback can be given anytime, but is most effective the moment the employee is engaging in the behavior that you either want to praise or correct.

Know the numbers

Certainly, it doesn’t take long for every new dentist to realize that just as important as your role as dentist is your role as CEO. It is critical that you understand completely the business side of your practice. There are 22 practice systems, and you should be well versed in each of them. If not, seek out training for new dentists. The effectiveness of the practice systems will directly and greatly impact your own success today and throughout your entire career.

Overhead. For starters, routinely monitor practice overhead. It should break down according to the following benchmarks to ensure that it is within the industry standard of 55 percent of collections.

• Dental supplies 5%
• Office supplies 2%
• Laboratory 10%
• Payroll 20%
• Rent and utilities 5%
• Insurance and benefits 5%
• Miscellaneous 10%

Salaries. Keep a particularly close eye on staff salaries. These can mushroom out of control and send overhead into the 70–80 percent range in record time. Payroll should be between 20-22 percent of gross income. Tack on another 5-5.5 percent for payroll taxes and benefits. If your payroll costs are higher than that, here’s what may be happening.

If the assistant emphasizes to Mrs. Patient just how much she is doing, you may need to take a second look at the procedure. Your success is directly affected by your staff. So speak up!

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