Staff Meetings: From Dull & Boring to Dynamic & Effective (Really!)

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craft meetings... desperately needed by all dental teams, yet everyone despises them. The drill usually unfolds something like this: Everyone comets/gets up, sits around a table, actually, most of them stroll in within 5 to 10 minutes of the appointed hour. They take their designated spots around the room. With props in hand, such as notepads and pens, they dutifully give the appearance that they are prepared to offer their uninhibited attention. That little charade last for roughly three to five minutes.

After that, a glance around the table reveals a packed house, one person gazing at the ceiling, another sters at the floor, still another looking into the yawning vacuum, a fourth is eying the stain on the doctor's coat and wondering how she should address the prescribing coordinator undergone the Burschnak Test. Everyone is wondering when the doctor's going to talk about something important like raises or vacation time.

Ah yes, the staff meeting, a monthly exercise in futility that ultimately results in lost productivity and lower revenue. The common lament from doctors is, "I've tried staff meetings only to abandon them because everyone was looking at me to do all the talking." Conversely, team members will assert, "We give input but nothing ever changes." In virtually all cases, the meetings couldn't produce results that would satisfy anyone because there wasn't a system or a standard established. Is it any wonder that the staff meeting is disliked by dentists and dental teams alike?

Unfortunately, staff meetings are often boring, dull and tedious. Worse yet, they seldom contribute to the success of the practice. So it's time to abandon this tired business ritual. No, in fact, I recommend you invest a bit more energy and effort on them. Why? Because most critical business decisions are made in meetings.

Such is the case when it comes to the business of dentistry. It is in staff meetings that major issues and problems are discussed, exam areas of responsibility/systems, establish policies, present information, motivate staff, and exchange ideas—all of which are important not only building an thriving practice but also maintaining one.

So how do you create business meetings that are dynamic and effective? A shift in your attitude. Look at meetings not as the standpoints of revenue and profitability, but rather the potential for significant revenue gain. Next, treat meetings as you would a practice. Establish expectations and standards, and implement the fundamentals of inspired and effective staff meetings.

Prepare or Perish

Monthly meetings must have an agenda that includes standard items the practice is continuously monitoring. Without one, you and your team are left to wonder aimlessly, which is incredibly frustrating for everyone, not to mention totally inefficient. Specifically you want to discuss all areas affecting the profitability/success of the practice. For example, numbers of new patients, recall patients, collections, treatment acceptance, production, accounts receivables, unscheduled time units for doctors and hygienists, uninsured insurance revenues over 60 days, overhead, etc.

One person, not the dentist, is responsible for compiling and distributing the agenda to doctors and staff in advance of the meeting. However, this person is not in charge of developing the actual agenda. That task is the responsibility of the full team.

The number of new patients scheduled for the month.

Number of new patients actually seen by the doctor and/recruit.

Number of emergency patients scheduled for the month.

Number of emergency patients treated for the month.

Number of emergency patients converted to preventative.

Number of patients and dollar amount of unscheduled time units for doctors and hygienists.

Number of patients with unscheduled treatment.

Now that everyone knows the numbers, the group can discuss if the practice is on track with its goals. Are there specific system barriers that are preventing the scheduling coordinator and, consequently, the practice from achieving those goals? Use the collective problem solving skills of the team to compute answers to those barriers and help identify solutions to problems that may be occurring in the scheduling system.

Welcome Opinions, Views & Disagreements

Seek input from everyone, and don't be afraid of conflicting views. In fact, encourage it. When individual members of the team raise concerns, problems and issues, that enable the entire group to explore the positives and negatives of a particular topic, and make certain to address those effectively. If consensus is reached too quickly on major issues, chances are good that members of the team are not sharing their views openly and honestly. They are afraid to voice their true opinions after the meeting.

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When putting the final meeting agenda together, list the most critical issues at the top of the list. First, cover the key systems. Each month the individual team members report on the status of their specific areas.

While consensus is good to strive for, it's not always possible. Ultimately, the team makes the decision that while individuals may have disagreements during the discussion, everyone supports the final decision, which is made by the doctor.

To encourage discussion, the facilitator should ask questions such as, "How do you feel about this? What is your reaction to that? As the patient, how would you react? What are the advantages of this approach? What are the potential disadvantages? Team participation is essential to the success of not only the meeting but also in implementing recommendations that may result from discussions during the meeting.

Develop the Plan of Action

Delegate responsibility and establish deadlines for completing tasks identified during the meeting. For example, if hygiene cancellations are high and the group has developed a plan to reduce the cancellations, the person responsible probably the hygiene coordinator—needs to know whether/she is accountable for implementing the changes and should be responsible for the effect of those changes at the next meeting.

Once the systems are reported on, the remaining time can be used to cover other items on the agenda, including staff training and education. For example, if members of the team attended a continuing education program, they should be expected to share with the team highlights from the program and specific techniques or strategies that they believe would be helpful in the practice.

If the office is offering a new service or product, the staff meeting is an excellent venue to instruct the team on the new item, answer any questions and ensure that every employee is prepared to answer questions from patients. If the doctor is offering a new treatment, such as implants, he/she should schedule time during the meeting to educate the entire team about the procedure. The group can discuss how to market the procedure, how to effectively discuss it with patients, how to handle questions about it, where they can acquire additional information, etc.

Teams also can use the time to address particular challenges, such as collections or effectively explaining the financial policy to patients through a series of meetings. In addition, journal articles on numerous practice issues can be shared and discussed during the meetings.

Consider the Environment

If possible, the two-hour monthly staff meetings should be held off-site in a conference room with a conference table, and eliminate outside interruptions. Seek consensus from the staff as to the best time to hold staff meetings, and remember that meetings scheduled outside normal work hours should be paid.

Evaluate the quality of your monthly business meeting by answering the following questions.

- Were the discussion topics known prior to the meeting?
- Did co-workers have an opportunity to contribute to the meeting?
- Were the meeting environment comfortable?
- Did the meeting start and finish on time?
- Did everyone have a voice in the discussion?
- Were minutes distributed after the meeting to document what was discussed?
- Were recommended actions followed up on for completion?
- Was each topic given adequate time?
- Were there outside interruptions?

Meetings are intended to be designated times in which you can focus on all of your energy and team resources on addressing key practice issues. Run correctly, they are the most effective means to identify and solve problems, establish policies, share information, motivate each other, define areas of responsibility and exchange ideas. Use them to your practice's full advantage.

The author

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