Finding the right coach for your practice

Chris Barrow discusses the benefits of the right business coach

There’s no doubt that dental business coaching has achieved a much higher profile in recent years. Most people are aware of the profession, but they may be less certain of exactly what it entails, how long it lasts and what the benefits are. Broadly, there are two types of business coaching: quantitative and qualitative, and the length of the contract very much depends on the relationship with the client.

An example of a quantitative relationship could be a dentist wishing to increase their profits by 50 per cent. Once they reach that point, the target has been achieved and the contract fulfilled. Other targets could include a conversion from NHS to private, or to get some senior team members, or to increase the number of implants being placed. The dentist gives a pair of eyes in the management placed. The dentist gives a pair of eyes in the management, and they are looking for the dentist. Dentists have got unhappy people; part of the business coach’s role is to try and get them as happy as they can be.

When appointing a business coach, it’s imperative to check their formal coaching qualifications, to ensure they have been trained in the formal procedures of how to conduct a coaching relationship, as well as to read testimonials from their clients. However, it’s not only about qualifications and experience; it’s also about ‘the magic’. If you don’t feel good about each other, then no amount of qualification or experience will make any difference. The coach and the client are effectively interviewing each other and the dentist has got to ask him or herself - does it feel right? Am I enjoying myself?

A lot of it is intuitive. I think that’s why women generally make better business owners than men, because they follow their intuition, which is usually very accurate. When bravery and ego get in the way, it always goes wrong.

A business coach becomes part of the team, and importantly, a team member with the experience that the dentist does not yet possess. Whatever the business venture, whether it’s a dental practice, florist or pub, it’s going to be a good idea to have someone around who’s got a 10 to 15 years’ head start.

There’s a fantastic quotation attributed to North American Indians, ‘wisdom enters through the wound’. In other words, if you’re going to open up a business, you need a battle-scarred veteran on side; someone who’s run their own florist or pub, it’s going to be a good idea to have someone around who’s got a 10 to 15 years’ head start.

As with any business, it’s a cliché that the best way to learn is to hire a coach that charges £4,500 please. It’s a cliché, but you really do get what you pay for. Let’s face it, if you want to be a dentist who is grossing £4,500 a day doing implants, do you really want to hire a coach that charges £4,500 a day because they know what that feels like. They understand that conversations and know how to look someone in the face without blinking and say ‘that’ll be £4,500 please’.

In the mid-1990’s, there were probably three UK dental business coaches. Nowa-days, there are a huge number to choose from. Also during that time, the demographic of dental practice ownership has changed. Previously, practice principals were between 45 to 60 years old, now people start buying practices at 55.

Specialisations have also begun to creep into coaching in the same way that you get specialisations in dentistry. There are now a focus on areas such as marketing, team training, financial controls and management, social media marketing, treatment coordination, front desk and telephony, and so on.

Dentists need to determine if they need general business advice from a strategic perspective, or very specific tactical implementation, or both. Take a good look round the marketplace to see what’s available and decide if individual help is needed or a blended solution from more than one provider.

As with any business, a dental practice is at its most productive when principals surround themselves with the right people in the right roles and delegate accordingly. How can you move to the next level if you can’t see the bigger picture? Having a skilled team in place – including a business coach – is the difference between being down in the trenches and sitting in a hot air balloon with a clear view all around you.