Why improving your practice is a mystery – part 13

The GDC doesn’t require you to love your colleagues, says Jacqui Goss

When I first started visiting dental practices doing consultancy work some years ago, I was surprised at how often I had to play the role of intermediary. I’d worked as a manager, including in dental practices, so I knew that staff don’t get on with each other all the time. But it still amazed me how often a member of a dental practice team would say: “Oh, I didn’t know (so and so) felt that way.” Practice owners would also comment (for example): “I wish I’d known (so and so) wanted to work extra hours.”

It was not that staff didn’t speak to each other or that principals and managers ignored team members – they just didn’t communicate. And do you know what? It’s still happening all these years later.

I’m no longer surprised at adopting a liaison role – telling each person what the other will say to me but not directly to their colleague. Sometimes it’s because the subject matter is a bone of contention and I need to act as a mediator. Often, it’s because one or other person doesn’t feel confident enough or sufficiently empowered to speak up.

For example, in team discussions about changing the practice opening hours there’ll often be a member of staff who contributes very little. Then I come on the scene doing some consultation about, say, front of house staff training and that person tells me in confidence that they wanted to work extra hours and earn more but the opportunity went to another team member. When I confer with the practice manager they’ll often exclaim (with some frustration): “I wish I’d known that!”

Sometimes, I come across team members who just do not get on. They may be clinical and non-clinical staff, managers and dentists, hygienists and front of house staff or any combination of these roles. There is, to coin a phrase, a clash of personalities. Quite often these occur in small practices with only a handful of staff and the situation invariably arises when something disturbs the equilibrium – a new person joins or someone gets promoted.

I’m not about to dive into trait theory (if only I could!) or expound the Myers Briggs model of personality – let’s keep this simple. Surely, if you’re working in or applying for a job in a small dental practice you need the ability and disposition to
Simply adding some ‘softening’ words can turn what may be interpreted as an aggressive demand into a consultation or request. For example: “I’ve done a treatment plan for patient so and so, perhaps you’d like to look at it,” or “I’m going out at two o’clock so can you get it done by then please?”

If you’re someone who is reluctant to speak up during team meetings (and these events should be managed in a way that no one has such concerns), rather than keep what you want to say to yourself, at least indicate that there’s something on your mind. You can do so during or at the end of a meeting by simply saying (to whoever is chairing it): “Can I speak with you about that afterwards?”

If you have an ‘issue’ with another team member, don’t bottle it up – speak to them about it. If necessary choose a setting that is relaxing (for both you and them) – suggest having a coffee together at lunchtime or after work. It can be helpful to include another team member – but not your best mate. Ask someone along who will be dispassionate and not likely to take sides. And try to remember that while your ‘beef’ is important to you, in the great scale of things (Life, the Universe and Everything in the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy series) it is probably less significant and certainly not worth erecting a barrier with a colleague over.

Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go and break up an argument between my two teenage daughters...