Are you settling for mediocrity? Is your practice merely getting by? Do you feel surrounded by complacency? So there’s no excitement or enthusiasm, you say? It’s not that the team is outwardly negative or difficult, it’s just that “average” has become simply good enough in their minds. Is it possible that new ideas seldom emerge because they are shot down as quickly as they surface?

Are issues with systems perpetually the backburner, kept there by the proliferation of excuses explaining why the changes won’t work, can’t work or would simply be too much work to fix? So there you stand having lost control of the practice you once loved. It’s become the daily grind and at times it seems that you tick away the hours at the mercy of those who seemingly care to do nothing more than simply get by.

As familiarity breeds contempt, complacency breeds mediocrity. If teams are not challenged to continuously improve, when the push is on to do things differently the shift can be unnecessarily traumat-ic because the staff feel threatened, so they resist it. They’ve settled into their “way” of doing things and don’t understand why what seems to have worked perfectly fine in the past is suddenly called into question.

Sounds like a major issue with the team, right? Wrong. What we have in circumstances such as this is more likely to be a major issue with the leadership. The team mirrors the leadership of the practice.

Look carefully at your team: Does each member reflect your commitment to excellence? Is every staff member open to change? Are you willing to challenge them to make changes?

In addition, are you willing to invest the time to educate them on why change is necessary? Or do you shun better, more efficient systems and procedures because Mary Jane has been there since the beginning of time and you decided long ago that it’s not worth it to challenge her negative attitude and poor performance?

Have you been rationalizing your fear of addressing the problem by telling yourself that she handles all the insurance, or she knows all the patients or whatever the excuse? If you’ve chosen to ignore the problem, you’ve abdicated your responsibility as the leader. You can count Mary Jane as one of your concrete blocks — dead weight tethering your practice to average performance.

Being the leader takes courage to examine systems, processes and staff. Change those things that don’t work, but, most importantly, challenge everyone — not just yourself — to continuously improve.

Your team members are taking their cues from you. If you have a “Mary Jane” and she is unwilling to change or do things differently, she is the shining example for the rest of the team to follow suit.

Employees are expert “boss watchers.” They are quietly watching as you look the other way, make excuses and allow employees such as Mary Jane to run the show.

The irony is that most employees want to excel and they want to be challenged. Yet they look to the orthodontist to be the leader and address Mary Jane’s unacceptable attitude and poor performance.

Yes, I know it’s not easy, but it’s mandatory. Read on.

**Reluctant leaders**

Orthodontists, by virtue of their position as CEO of the practice, are the leaders, but often they don’t take to that role naturally, and frequently they do not have leadership experience to prepare them for the responsibility.

Orthodontists are trained to be excellent clinicians and they are. They are not, however, trained to have the necessary communication or business skills to lead teams and steer clear of complacency.

However, dramatic leadership improvement can occur under the right circumstances if the orthodontist truly wants a practice that reflects the level of excellent care he or she provides.

In order to improve leadership skills and avoid settling into a state of mediocrity and ultimately the loss of power and control over the practice, orthodontists must take three essential steps:

- Change your definition of leadership.
- Change your behaviors as leaders.
- Change your expectations of the desired outcomes.

The leadership definition for small businesses is quite different than it is for large companies. The vision is to make a good living. The plan is to work hard every day delivering the best service and quality to patients.

The required communications skills consist of knowing what you want your staff to do and telling them.

The leader must explain to the staff what is expected of them, how their performance will be measured and how that performance will be rewarded. In exchange, the followers will get paid and appropriately recognized. Rather than allowing your practice to sink under the weight of mediocre minions, choose to build and lead a team of star players.

Focus initially on the following manageable steps. You will see improvement almost immediately. Those who are valuable to the future success of the practice will emerge as will those who aren’t.

**Get the right people into the right jobs**

Some employees are perfectly at ease asking for payment, while others feel as if they were making some extraordinarily difficult
demand of the patient. In the Mary Jane example above, she may be an excellent employee who is in the absolute wrong position. I highly recommend personality testing to place your team members in positions in which they can excel, not just get by.

The Keirsey Temperament Sorter Test, found at www.keirsey.com, is an excellent tool to use for this process.

Tell it like it is
Develop job descriptions for each position. Specify the skills necessary for the position. Outline the specific duties and responsibilities. Include the job title, summary of the position and its responsibilities and a list of duties. This is an ideal tool to explain to employees exactly what is expected of them.

Train
I’ve watched this mind boggling scene hundreds of times: orthodontists allowing untrained team members to handle tens of thousands of dollars in practice revenues. Nothing creates distrust, generates conflict or causes more internal problems than team members who are not trained.

They feel insecure and vulnerable because they’ve been tossed into a situation in which they are expected to perform duties and responsibilities, and largely guessing at how to carry them out. This is a recipe for failure.

Think about it, would you hand them the instrument tray, a couple of handpieces and say, “Have at it, let’s see what you can do.” Of course not! Team members must be given the training to succeed and expected to meet specific performance standards.

Encourage the best
In addition to job descriptions and clear and specific goals, your team will also want to know how you will measure their success. When the time comes to evaluate your team, that too should follow specific guidelines; it’s not just a matter of assessing whether your assistant is a nice person. It is about evaluating how well she/he is able to carry out her/his responsibilities.

Used effectively, you’ll find that employee performance measurements and reviews can provide critical information that will be essential in your efforts to make major decisions regarding patients, financial concerns, management systems, productivity and staff throughout your career.

Moreover, performance measurements and a credible system for employee review consistently yield a more effective and higher-performing team member. The fact is that when we understand the rules of the game and how we can win, life and work are a lot more fun and rewarding.

Celebrate
Inspire the team with a practice vision and goals and recognize the progress you make together in achieving those goals.

Take time to pat yourselves on the back for the accomplishments that you achieve. Create incentives for staff to use their skills and training to develop plans to continuously improve patient services, boost treatment acceptance and build a better practice and reward them for their efforts.

If you create a structured environment with clear expectations and a plan for total team success, the Mary Janes and the rest of the crew will likely rise to the occasion.

Thus, you will no longer be suffering through the daily grind. Rather, you will be leading a happy and successful team that is not only open to change and continuous improvement, it is actively pursuing it every day.