



A BETTER PRACTICE

Five fundamental leadership strategies

Roger P. Levin, DDS

Q HOW CAN I GET MY STAFF MEMBERS TO FUNCTION MORE LIKE A TEAM?

A In today's more challenging environment, dentists are realizing that their leadership skills—or lack thereof—can have a profound effect on practice success. Learning how to lead a practice team more effectively deserves to be an educational priority throughout every dentist's career. It is vital to a practice's health as a business, and methodologies evolve constantly. However, there are certain fundamentals of leadership that always apply and should be mastered as early as possible. Here, based on my experience with thousands of dentists, are 5 essential management techniques that characterize the most successful team leaders.

ESTABLISHING AND SHARING A PRACTICE VISION AND GOALS

All businesses, including dental practices, function better and progress more quickly if they have specific objectives their owners want to achieve. These objectives commonly are articulated in the form of a vision statement and several goals, which, if reached, will bring about the fulfillment of that vision. These are not meant to express the ultimate state of the practice (though the dentist also may have that in mind). The vision and goals define where the practice will be in 3 to 5 years. When the leader introduces a vision and goals to the team

members, they serve as motivational tools and as guidelines for investment and resource allocation.

Rather than just going through their daily routines, dentists and staff members will have a shared sense of purpose.

PROVIDING JOB DESCRIPTIONS AND PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

When staff members' responsibilities are not spelled out clearly in writing, or when job descriptions have not been reviewed and modified to reflect changes that have occurred in the practice, confusion and misunderstandings will undermine efficiency. Team members cannot be expected to develop patterns of cooperation and coordination, which are essential to excellent team functioning, automatically. Working in conjunction with the office manager and other staff members, dentists need to devise systems that will achieve the desired teamwork and to add specifics to the job descriptions of those involved. To make job descriptions even more useful in team leadership—and to motivate staff members to excel—dentists are advised to incorporate relevant performance targets. These allow for ongoing self-evaluation by team members and set the stage for performance reviews. Conducted annually, these one-to-one meetings provide the opportunity to discuss the person's career, encompassing not only job performance but also job satisfaction and aspirations.

DELEGATING MOST NONCLINICAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Some dentists take a hands-on approach to running a practice,

reserving all decision making for themselves, intervening frequently in administrative tasks, micromanaging staff members, and generally second-guessing everything that happens. This does not represent leadership. Aside from the fact that this approach prevents team members from developing skills, confidence, and a sense of shared purpose, it also prevents dentists from devoting more of their time to direct patient care. By delegating virtually all administrative functions (and providing training to enable staff members to handle broader roles), the team leader will be able to upgrade practice performance in every regard.

MODIFYING LEADERSHIP STYLE TO SUIT VARIOUS SITUATIONS

A practice leader's behavior and attitude have a greater effect on staff members than most dentists imagine. It is important that the dentist not only serve as an excellent role model but also shift his or her style to reflect different circumstances. Sometimes, a motivator-in-chief approach will work best. Sometimes, a coach is needed to explain ways individual team members can improve proficiency. And there are occasions, such as in a crisis, when it is appropriate to give orders, reassuring the team members that everything will be fine. Being a good leader depends on understanding what is best in different situations.

ENGAGING IN MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF MEMBERS

As in some of the areas already discussed, the ability to communicate

well with staff members overall has a tremendous bearing on the effectiveness of a practice leader. From sharing the practice vision, to welcoming suggestions, to conducting helpful performance reviews, the best leaders help team members feel better and work better every day. Whether in meetings or casual conversations, what leaders say will have a tremendous effect on those around them.

CONCLUSION

Learning to be an effective practice leader is a challenging and ongoing process. However, by implementing the 5 strategies discussed here, dentists will be able to begin building a team capable of providing even better patient care. ■ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adaj.2016.10.006>

Copyright © 2017 American Dental Association. All rights reserved.

Dr. Levin is the founder and chief executive officer, Levin Group, 10 New Plant Court, Owings Mills, MD 21117, e-mail rlevin@levingroup.com. Address correspondence to Dr. Levin.

Disclosure. Dr. Levin did not report any disclosures.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or official policies of the American Dental Association.