

Team development equals practice growth

Laura Horton discusses why developing the skill set of your team should be at the top of your agenda for the next 12 months

As dentists you have spent many years developing your skills to become excellent clinicians in areas that interest you. There is now a great deal of talk and encouragement to development the dental team. Hygienists have been attending whitening courses in vast numbers and teams are keen to learn new skills to not only develop themselves, but also to help the practice they work for to grow in key areas.

The skills that the team members learn - whether they are front desk or nursing staff - will not only lighten the workload you have as dentists but also improve the patient's perception of your practice. The two key areas I feel that dental teams should enhance their capabilities are

1. Dental photography
2. Patient communication based skills.

Dental photography

I heard recently that in America all support staff take a full series of digital photographs for all new patients. The assistant in the surgery will also take all clinical photographs throughout treatment.

When I worked in practice, as part of a team, this is what we did for every patient. It was beneficial for the following reasons:

1. It is rewarding for the team to perform this task
2. It allows dentists to see a full series of pictures, before they even see a patient
3. When the patient has photographs taken during treatment it gives the dentist a break for a couple of minutes - great during long appointments when you need to write notes or give your eyes a rest
4. Patients feel that they are in a very professional environment when the team do this on behalf of the dentist

Laboratories enjoy receiving good quality photographs of the patient before and during treatment. This delivers positive results and improves the level of communication between the

technician and the dentist. Orthodontic practices in the UK have been encouraging their teams to take the photographs for a long time too. If, as a dentist, you are confident and can take good pictures of patients you should be spending time training your entire team to do this on your behalf. If you need help or do not have the time to train your team it is worthwhile investing in training so they can all develop in this area.

Once your team are trained all you need is a system to ensure that all new patients have the full series taken prior to them seeing you. My advice is that all new patients are booked in 15 minutes before they see the dentist for their new patient examination to have these photographs taken. In that 15 minutes there will be enough time to take the pictures and download them ready for you to view prior to seeing the patient. If you have a Treatment Coordinator then they can take the photographs on the day they first see the patient. This alone is a powerful tool.

I strongly believe that the entire team, including the front desk, should learn this skill. A good teacher can ensure that a front desk person, who has never even picked up your SLR camera, can take a full series with less than 10 minutes intensive training.

Patient communication

You have read and heard many times that the front desk team set the impression of your practice. This is a system that needs to be created and set in stone. Everybody must be singing from the same hymn sheet.

How often do you ring your practice? Do you give feedback to the manager as to whether this is positive or negative? If you do not, then you should do. Prior to writing this article I have been trying to speak to a practice manager. The phone line was either engaged or I was immediately greeted and put on hold. This is very frustrating. I was on hold twice for over two minutes before I hung up. This feedback had to be given to the practice manager - well, as soon as I managed to (eventually) contact her!

Everybody telephoning a business expects the phone to be picked up in three rings. Why not go the extra mile and ensure that your phone is picked up within two rings? Do your team all answer the telephone the same way? Do they speak in a monotone voice? This is where practice makes perfect and time must be taken with all of your team to ensure you create a sys-

tem and that everybody complies with it.

Putting your patients on hold is not acceptable. Although the front desk person may be with a patient, the patient on the other end of the telephone line does not know this. When you have picked up the phone and you cannot deal with the call right then, it is much more preferable to take a message, and say that you will call the patient back, rather leaving them on hold for minutes on end.

Again, simply telling the team to do this is all well and good, you need to practice this with the team and have a system for the messages. Where are the written messages? Who will return the call? When I go into a practice, many of the team feel uncomfortable greeting new patients. They do not meet them at eye level, smile, and shake their hand. This should be part of your new patient system, journey, experience - whatever you want to call it.

Practicing handshakes is very important. We all know the importance of a good handshake - check how your team do this, and in turn ask for feedback on your handshake. Body language is a part of communicating and this must be right - you have to send the right signals to your patients at all times.

I feel that now, more than ever, people expect a good service for the fee that they are paying. Whether this is in a restaurant, a hairdressing salon, or the dentist. Every patient, new or old, needs to feel that they have been given not only your time and attention, but that of the whole team too. The role that is driving the patients experience forward is the role of a Treatment Coordinator. This role delivers high levels of patient care and provides a WOW factor for patients. This encourages the whole team to deliver an outstanding experience.

The way the team communicates with your patients is paramount to the perception of the practice. If that perception is negative it can undo all the years of hard work you have put in to excel yourself. So how does your team excel? I advise you to ask your team to create a new patient system, and spend time developing and nurturing your team in their photography and communication skills - their confidence in themselves and the system is the key.

If you do this, your practice, or the practice you work for, will grow and have patients that see you as an entourage of professionals rather than the hygienists and dentists being the only ones.



Laura travels throughout the UK bringing her unique Treatment Coordinator programme direct to you. The training Laura Horton Consulting provides is bespoke to suit your practices goals and vision. All training is in-house and CPD verifiable. For further information contact 07912 360779, email laura@laurahortonconsulting.co.uk or visit the website at www.laurahortonconsulting.co.uk