

# How to manage change effectively in a dental practice

*With the rapid pace of change, which only seems to be increasing, how do dental care professionals stay on top of the situation and remain in control? In this article, Laura Horton discusses how change needs to be effectively managed and communicated so that it is embraced*

In her seminars, Laura Horton often displays one word on the screen and asks the audience to write down their immediate feeling. That one word is change. Laura stands and observes as the audience write down, in one word, how they feel about change.

Change is a given and all dental practices need to be adaptable to stay in business. It is pointless burying our heads in the sand and hoping that something won't happen, or we will deal with it when it does—this is poor management practice. So if your practice is going to survive then changes will, no doubt, need to be introduced.

This article discusses the reaction to this request—why change is seen so negatively and how to make change a positive experience.

The words that are given to Laura are:

- Scared
- Unpleasant
- Dislike
- Unease
- Unhappy.

And for those that are brave enough to say how they feel, they have nothing to worry about as the remainder of the audience actually do agree.

There are some positives that Laura manages to pull out of the audience too. They may be few and far between but there are always at least three people who shout the words:

- Excited
- Happy
- Fun
- Good
- Enjoyable.

Yes, they are in a minority but they always happen to be the people that are sitting in the front three rows. That is not to say the people who



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describe change negatively are all at the back—they are often scattered evenly—but the seating position of the positive reaction is always intriguing to observe.

## What is change?

The dental practice you work for is a business, and just like every business it must consistently change or it will fail. It is a fact that stagnant businesses, of

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any sort, fail. Who would have thought 5 years ago we would be hearing and witnessing dental practices folding?

So if your practice has not made many changes lately, besides preparation for the Care Quality Commission (CQC) legislation, then watch out—you need to make changes to remain competitive. Therefore, you may find your employer suddenly asking for lots of new plans to be implemented.

### Why are people afraid of change?

The main reason for the negative feelings towards change is due to a poor past experience.

#### Fear of change

If I complete this for my company will it put my job at risk? Will they still need me? If I agree to do this, will my co-workers dislike me? What if this task I have to do does not work out and I am seen as a failure?

#### Lack of understanding

Often people do not comply with a request because they do not understand why it needs to be completed. People think if they put off new jobs, the boss will not notice. It may be that you do not feel comfortable enough to say that you do not understand.

When it comes to understanding, you have two types of situations: lack of knowledge to complete the task, or lack of understanding why it needs to be completed. Both of these problems are caused by poor communication.

To overcome a lack of knowledge, tell your boss you are keen to help them but you need to have the new tasks and roles explained to you face to face. Your boss will be aware of your strengths and weaknesses. If you are given a task, which you feel is out of your comfort zone, do not put up barriers. You need to go for it. Your boss would not ask if they did not think you were capable.

#### Personality

We all have different personalities. One method

of measuring different personalities is the DISC personality system. Research has shown that behavioural characteristics can be grouped together in four major divisions called personality styles: dominant, influence, steadiness and compliance.

Dominance can be summarised as the factor of control. People with this factor prominent in their DISC profiles focus on the need to achieve and maintain a measure of authority and power over other people and, more generally, the environment in which they live and work.

Influence is the second factor described by a DISC profile. The communicative and socially confident style of those with high Influence tends to be balanced by a rather impulsive and sometimes irrational approach to life. The urge to relate to and impress those around them can lead such a person to act in ways that other less socially-oriented types find very difficult to understand.

‘Steadiness’ and ‘compliance’ characters will always need to have a full understanding of why each task has to be completed. An example would be:

*Dentist: ‘Janis, from now on when you answer the phone I need you to smile when using the greeting and give the caller your name.’*

*Janis: ‘OK’.*

*And then Janis does not do it. You might be Janis and are asked why. You reply: ‘old habits die hard’ or ‘it will take me a while to get used to it, I will try to do it’ or ‘I am doing it, you just do not hear me.’*

Does the situation sound familiar to you? The reason Janis does not do this is because she needs to know the ‘but why’. Here would be the reasons:

- Janis is very professional and you respect her highly and you want patients to get the same impression of her that you have
- The first impression the new patients have is a really professional one
- Research shows that nervous patients warm to the practice when the person is smiling and gives their name, and as a dentist/practice you love treating nervous patients
- You want to be different from the other practices in your town
- Patients can tell when you are smiling and you need to know that the practice is a happy place.

This list can go on. Again this conversation should

happen face to face. The 'steadiness' and 'compliance' characters will then do as they have been asked. Janis would need to practice answering the telephone, with the dentist present, so she knows exactly what is expected.

## Lots of change vs regular change

Anecdotal evidence suggests that practices have very infrequent practice meetings. When they do have meetings, there is just one-way communication (telling), rather than encouraging meeting participation and sharing of ideas and opinions. And when changes are made, the practice usually tries to make too many of them at the same time.

This is when change does not happen effectively and this is why team members feel change is a waste of time. Here is what to do:

- Hold practice meetings for a whole day once a month, as a minimum
- Have an agenda and someone to take the minutes
- All action points are to be typed immediately and given to each team member, with deadlines
- Share all the actions points fairly between the team
- When changes are needed, explain them in detail and give all the benefits and confirm what skills team members will need
- Do not expect it all to be done in one week. Space the changes fairly
- Ensure you are focused on the deadlines and ask for continual feedback throughout the month
- Review all the action points at the next meeting. This makes the team feel very good about accomplishing the action points, so congratulate them.

An example of this would be at a practice the author visited recently. The front-desk team were new and needed training. While attending the practice for a consultation, the principal was advised to ask his team to use their name immediately in their telephone greeting. The team also had to confirm how each new patient heard of the practice.

Further to that, the team was given two requests to complete the following week. The reason for this was to get them used to change. A change will occur at least once a week from now on. Only a small amount of change was requested because no training had been undertaken with the new team as yet.

## Conclusion

Following this strategy is a fast-track way to ensure that your practice does not stay stagnant and that



*Taking action points in a practice meeting are a useful way of delegating responsibility*

change does happen. Whether it is a small thing or a big new project, the results will be positive and you can change your team into one of those that find change fun and exciting.

Your practice needs you to help it grow and you can all learn together. The best way to achieve this is by managing change effectively. DN

## KEY POINTS

- **As situations alter and circumstances evolve, capabilities, processes, working practices and other areas may need to be reviewed.**
- **Certain people are also much better at managing change than their peers.**
- **A profitable dental practice must evolve over time to compete successfully and meet the changing needs and expectations of its patients.**
- **Being up-to-date with prevailing dental care techniques and standards is crucial as is remaining current with industry technology and equipment.**