

Planning for Peak Performance

October 4, 2017

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You don't approach a cosmetic case with the intention of creating a smile that looks "okay," or design a crown to fit "good enough." Why should you settle for a profit margin that is "okay," or practice growth that is "good enough?" The answer is that you shouldn't, and you don't have to. You can achieve peak performance and take your success to a new level, with strategic planning, leadership, teamwork, and effective patient relationship-building.

Planning

When you devise a treatment plan, you have a clear goal in mind, you know exactly what needs to be done, and understand how each detail will impact the outcome. In your role as a clinician, you are confident in your decisions and recommendations, because you thoroughly understand the situation, and have solid reasons behind your choice.

If you are like many dentists, your role as a businessperson is more challenging. Often, decisions are made out of context of the big picture. Whether setting policies, purchasing equipment, or hiring staff, you think of the people and processes immediately impacted. When those decisions are implemented, they can have unexpected consequences. This happens because you are lacking the guidance of a clear goal and plan.

Vision statement – This is exactly what it sounds like. What is your vision of success? How do you imagine the (ideal) future of your dental practice?

Mission statement – Every business, no matter the industry, has a common goal of being profitable. However, that is not the only goal. There is a reason that you chose dentistry rather than law, general medicine, retail sales, or the hundreds of other options. Why does your practice exist? What are its objectives and approaches?

Business plan – This is your roadmap to success. It should include a description of your practice, organizational structure, market analysis, sales strategies, and financial projections. Think of it as a long-term health plan for your practice.

Leadership

The old adage “dentistry is a profession, not a business” no longer holds true. The days of the neighborhood dentist who treats everyone and everything are gone. Dentistry has become a highly competitive and infinitely complex industry. Unless you want to be an employee, you need to be a businessperson – and an effective leader.

An effective leader is not a tyrant, or a pushover. If you are assertive and decisive by nature, it can be easy to dismiss input from your staff. However, the more information and ideas you gather, the better decisions you can make. When team members have complaints or suggestions, listen. Don't just give them a few minutes of your time, but actually try to understand the issue. When you are planning changes in your practice, gather feedback from everyone.

At the other end of the spectrum, if you are non-confrontational, it may be tempting to give in to pressure from employees. There will be people who resist change simply because they are more comfortable with status quo. There will be those who resist following policy, or attempt to change it, for their own benefit, rather than the good of the practice. Involve the entire team, but never forget your role in the team is leader.

Teamwork

Some dentists say that their success wouldn't be possible without their trusted assistants, office managers, and awesome teams. Were they incredibly lucky in hiring the perfect people? Possibly. However, it is much more likely that they implement good human resource strategies.

How can you create a spirit of teamwork, and optimize employee performance?

Motivate – Some people go to work because they need the paycheck. They are motivated by the desire to stay employed. Therefore, they are unlikely to perform above the minimum requirements. Bonuses and other financial incentives, as well as opportunities for advancement, are good motivators. However, even those things will not create a positive attitude and loyalty. The best motivators don't cost anything except a bit of your time – recognition, praise, treating employees with respect, including them in decisions, and generally showing genuine appreciation.

Communicate – Provide detailed written job descriptions, responsibilities, and employee policies. When there is a problem with an employee or department, refrain from ranting, avoiding it, or simply telling them to do better. Explain the problem and make sure the employee or employees know what is expected. When they raise issues or offer explanations, listen, and try to understand. Implement changes if appropriate. If the excuse is not acceptable, clearly communicate that fact.

Train – Many dentists shy away from staff training due to expense, but it may be the smartest investment you will ever make. The more they know, the farther you will go. Offer customer service training for front desk personnel. Send clinical staff to seminars and workshops. Take advantage of instructional videos and classes for software or devices you use in your practice. Also, when new team members come on board, be sure they are educated in your practice policies, procedures, and workflow. Provide a generous orientation period and assign a senior employee to mentor them.

Patient Relationships

The patient relationship begins the moment a person contacts your office, which is one of the reasons customer service training is essential. Make sure that your phone is always answered during business hours, and that emails are answered promptly. The use of phone scripts can help guide employees to say the right thing, at the right time.

When patients visit your office, provide the best possible experience with convenient amenities, and minimal wait times. Ensure there is good communication between the front desk and the clinical staff, so that treatment planning and scheduling are hassle-free. Continue the theme of convenience and customer service by offering an online patient portal, which allows people to manage their dental care from their computers or mobile devices.

Encourage patient feedback by providing forms, encouraging online reviews, or with follow-up phone calls. Pay attention to what people are saying, and use this information to improve patient experience. Finally, don't forget to implement a strategic marketing plan, to keep new calls pouring into your office.



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