



Leading Your Dental Practice Team

The business of dentistry is changing at an ever-increasing pace. You must guide the direction of your practice through the constant changes in clinical technologies, federal regulations and marketplace forces. This requires a renewed emphasis on leadership. But what does it take to manage change, shape the values of your team, and thus be a true leader of your practice? This edition of *PMM News* presents the essential qualities and skills of leadership.

Top 10 Traits of Successful Leaders

If you peruse the business section of a local bookstore, you will see a bewildering array of books featuring different lists of traits critical for leadership. Here is a synthesis of the characteristics most commonly noted among successful leaders.

One: Trustworthy. Good leaders have integrity, which means they hold strong ethical standards, keep their commitments, treat employees equitably, and have a sense of fair play. Thus, they gain the respect of others and are better able to build commitment on the part of their team.

Two: Optimistic. Effective leaders see the future as full of promise. If you have an optimistic view of your practice, you can motivate and create excitement in your team. Few people are motivated by a "doomsday" outlook; your team wants to feel positive about the practice and their roles in it.

Three: Confident. Although true leaders recognize their shortcomings, they still hold a strong degree of confidence in themselves and their teams. Essentially, your employees will mirror your attitudes. If you are unsure or insecure about the practice,

so are they. If you are assured and confident, so are they.

Four: Energetic. Leaders are almost always active, alert and full of life. In a pediatric dental practice, you simply don't have the option of being slow, lethargic or unfocused. Your positive energy throughout the long hours of a practice day will keep you an effective leader of your team.

Five: Able to manage stress. You have no doubt met people who seem to suffer from never-ending (often self-producing) stress. They are not good candidates for leadership. Good leaders can tolerate frustration and manage stress in effective ways.

Six: Resilient. Leadership requires an ability to handle hardship and the motivation to overcome obstacles. You also need to be comfortable with criticism, willing to let go of prior mistakes or failures and able to calmly face the multiple challenges and competing priorities posed by a pediatric dental practice.

Seven: Decisive. Being a great leader doesn't mean rushing into a decision without thinking it through. Nor does it mean putting off a decision until events decide the issue for you. It means taking the time and effort necessary to gather the needed information, then making a decision and acting on it.

Eight: Intuitive. We've all made decisions that later cause a serious stomachache. Strong leaders don't ignore their feelings or gut reactions, but recognize instead that some situations require more than logic and reasoning. Part of leadership is using your intuition and trusting your gut when making decisions.



Nine: Empathetic. An additional component of leadership is an interest in and concern for others. It means being accessible, willing to listen and sensitive to the needs, values and potential of your team members. Without empathy, you will not get the best efforts from your employees.

Ten: Team-oriented. To be a good leader, personal power must be secondary to teamwork. Collaboration, conflict management and a commitment to employee development are all essential to leading a productive team.

Essential Skills for Leadership Excellence

We've covered the qualities of leadership, but what about the skills? Which specific abilities separate the great leaders from the merely mediocre ones? The following list describes the most important skills needed by leaders in today's business environment.

A clear vision or future direction. Effective leadership begins with a clear vision of the future of your pediatric practice – where your new patients will be coming from, what new technologies will serve patients and what clinical research will direct your oral health services. After you have established a firm direction for your practice, you must be able to explain it to team members by finding teachable moments on a day-to-day basis.

Key question: Do your team members know your goals for the practice and how their position responsibilities contribute to those goals?

A unity between partners. Strong leadership requires consistency across owner dentists, partners, associates and office managers. If you and your fellow leaders do not agree about such issues as how best to grow the practice, manage employees and establish office policies, you face devastating effects on employee morale and productivity. Your team needs a consensus not only about practice goals, but also about how the practice actually runs.

Key Question: Are your leaders all pulling in the same direction, or are you at odds with each other over priorities and management practices?

The ability to accept change. In the current healthcare environment, you can't stop changes in the marketplace, shifts in patient demographics or revisions to state and federal regulations. Therefore, you must help your team adjust to these changes to the advantage of your practice. The best ways to initiate change are to consistently

communicate the need for it and to provide careful training in new position responsibilities. For example, studies show that up to two-thirds of efforts to change meet with failure because the leaders do not articulate a compelling need for change, do not allocate sufficient resources to make it succeed or fail to support the efforts over time¹.

Key Question: Does your practice have a strong history of staying up with new technologies, clinical skills and business management systems?

The ability to delegate. You can't do everything yourself and, even if you could, it would be terrible for your practice. When you delegate to your employees, you create opportunities for skill development as well as multiply the amount of work that gets done. To delegate effectively, you must communicate the objectives clearly, supply the necessary information and skills, set timelines and standards and monitor progress. In other words, the game plan for good delegation is to give the right ball to the best possible players; let them run with it, but still coach the game from the sidelines.

Key Question: What responsibilities can you delegate without compromising quality care, patient satisfaction or team morale?

Communication skills. Even if you are pressed for time, don't leave your team members in the dark about matters important to the practice. When your team members have access to comprehensive information, they make better decisions and feel more comfortable with how things are going in the practice. When team members don't have relevant information, they tend not to live with the vacuum of ambiguity. Instead, they fill the vacuum with guesswork and gossip.

Therefore, a successful leader is able to provide clear information, listen effectively, offer constructive criticism, give positive feedback and manage efficient team meetings.

Key Question: Do you offer your team members clear, consistent and frequent communication?

Employee recognition. It's not that you don't recognize the great things your team does for your practice; it's more that you don't have a consistent plan to acknowledge their efforts. And recognition doesn't necessarily mean money – raises, bonus programs and the like. It also means a heartfelt thank you, a letter of recognition, a round of applause during a staff meeting, or a sincere compliment on work well done.

Key Question: Did I offer my team thanks and praise today?



Checklist for Quality Leadership

Based on a comprehensive survey of 276 organizations, the Corporate Leadership Council discovered factors that significantly impact the quality of leadership by executives.² The following checklist, based upon these factors, will help you determine your strengths and weaknesses in the hallmarks of leadership success.

- My partners, associates and I are good role models for our employees.
- I believe the educational development of my team members is important.
- Our practice takes action and makes changes based on clear goals and a strong business strategy.
- My practice provides positive recognition for high performance by employees.
- New employees to our practice participate in a carefully designed training program.
- Salary increases and other employee rewards are based on merit and top performance.
- The characteristics of honesty and integrity are strongly considered in the hiring process of new employees.
- Our practice follows a training and disciplinary process for employees with poor work performance.
- Our practice has a commitment to diversity.
- I am able to identify and articulate a long-term vision for the future of our practice.
- I am able to allocate practice resources across competing priorities.
- I have the ability to clearly communicate work expectations to the team members of my practice.
- I have high-quality relationships with my partners and/or associates.
- I encourage the input of my partners, associates and employees in hiring new team members for the practice.

Conclusion

By devoting time, energy and resources to strong leadership, you will see a positive impact on your practice. Not only will your team have better morale, fewer conflicts and reduced stress, but your practice will benefit from a stronger direction and an enhanced ability to respond to change.

References

1. Yearout, Steve and Miles, Gerry. *Growing Leaders*. Alexandria, VA: Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2001, p. 18.
2. *Hallmarks of Leadership Success*. Washington, D.C.: Corporate Leadership Council, 2003.

LEADERS ON LEADERSHIP

“Leaders are made, not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.”

Vince Lombardi

“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”

John F. Kennedy

“A good leader, when his work is done and his aim fulfilled, his people will all say, ‘We did this ourselves’.”

Lao Tzu

“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.”

Peter Drucker

“Men make history, and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.”

Harry S. Truman

“Great leadership shows average people how to do the work of superior people.”

John D. Rockefeller





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