

Not Another Staff Meeting! How to Make Yours Work Harder for Your Practice

Tired of staff meetings where no one says anything? Or everyone talks and no one does anything afterwards? Or meetings that start and end late, and do not cover the topics they were supposed to? Help is at hand with this issue of *PMM News*, covering such practical topics as how to arrange a truly productive meeting and avoid common pitfalls. Pediatric dental teams who participate in effective meetings are more likely to understand practice goals, recognize their importance to practice success, and be motivated to work productively. Most important, staff meetings can give you a chance to communicate clearly with your team – and allow your team a chance to communicate with you.

Benefits: What Can Good Meetings Do for Your Practice?

A successful team meeting allows you to accomplish five goals that will greatly enhance your practice and the motivation of your team members.

1. **Listen.** If you truly know your people, their strengths, ideas and attitudes, you can better manage them. Further, when staff members know they are listened to with respect, they become more committed to the practice.
2. **Share your vision.** Let employees know your long-range goals for practice development. Involve them in a discussion of how their day-to-day responsibilities contribute to the success of the entire practice.
3. **Keep employees informed.** Dental team members who are confused about practice methods or misunderstand how their duties relate to quality patient care become less productive. Use staff meetings to keep your team up-to-date on objectives for the practice and developments in the field of pediatric dentistry.
4. **Compliment team members.** Thank your team for their superlative efforts with patients. Mention instances of outstanding performance at every meeting. For example, AAPD member Donna J. Barefield (Dallas, Texas) presents a “You Go Girl!” award once a month to the staff member who has made the most significant contribution to the practice, such as offering a new idea, solving a problem, or engaging in a marketing effort.

5. **Give staff a sense of ownership.** Employees of all ages and both genders prefer a participatory versus an authoritarian management style. Thus, your staff meetings should be run (if possible) with a sense of equality and consensus. For example, a team member proposes an idea at a meeting and you hate it. To preserve harmony, you might be diplomatic and say, “That’s interesting. Let’s explore it.” Encourage all team members to voice what they think of the idea. In a team discussion, if everyone stops talking after you join in, you may be using a more authoritarian style than your staff is comfortable with. As the pediatric dentist, you might consider presenting your perspectives and solutions last – after your team has spoken. The more your staff is involved in decisions about the practice, the further motivated and committed to the practice they will be.

Characteristics: What Makes A Good Team Meeting?

Consider which of the following characteristics your team meetings already have, and the aspects you could adjust to make these more effective.

Organization. Good meetings begin and end on time. The reason for the meeting is clear, and team discussions are relevant to practice business. When the team decides upon an action, clear assignments with deadlines are made and accepted.

Open discussion. The meeting has a lot of discussion in which virtually everyone participates. One team member does not dominate the meeting. Everyone is given a fair hearing, and problems and solutions are examined from the viewpoints of various staff members.

Relaxed atmosphere. The feel of the meeting is informal and comfortable; usually snacks are served. For example, one pediatric office has the standard monthly meetings, but also holds quarterly meetings to deal with larger issues or provide training. The quarterly meetings are held on a weekday evening, and the pediatric dentist and team say, “We kick off our shoes, serve wine and laugh a lot.”

Disagreement. Team members are free to express their ideas, and differing opinions are encouraged. Disagreements are not suppressed or overridden by premature group action. The team seeks to resolve a conflict rather than to dominate the dissenting members of the group.

Good listening. Team members listen to each other with an attitude of respect and fairness. People are not afraid of seeming foolish by putting forth a creative yet extreme idea.

Consensus. Most decisions are reached when everyone is in general agreement. A formal vote or simple majority is typically not the basis for action.

Positive emotion. Team members are free to express their feelings, as well as their ideas. Criticism is frank and relatively comfortable, yet personal attacks are few.

Few politics. Decisions are made based upon “who has the best idea,” instead of “who is my best friend.” Front-desk and clinical staff do not align themselves into opposing groups. Apple-polishing seldom occurs because the pediatric dentist or office manager simply do not allow for it to work.

Ground Rules: Setting Up an Effective Team Meeting

Pediatric dental practices have a range of preferred arrangements for staff meetings. Most hold a meeting twice a month for about 45 minutes, or once a month for one hour to 90 minutes. Ideally, the date and time are held constant, such as 8 a.m. on the first Wednesday of each month. Encourage all full- and part-time employees to attend. Respect the time of the meeting; do not schedule patients over it. Below are additional tips for holding a productive meeting.

Create an agenda. This does not need to be fancy. Post an initial agenda on a team bulletin board with a list of suggested topics, review of the last meeting, and/or information from the office manager or pediatric dentist. Leave space for suggestions on new business. Distribute the final agenda to team members a couple of days before the meeting.

Give homework if necessary. Feel free to tell team members what they need to bring or be prepared to discuss. Would the discussion go better if team members read a particular article? Should they think of great ideas for marketing the practice? Could the office administrator bring production figures or a list of patients who have left the practice? * Do you need a volunteer to bring donuts, markers or flip chart?

***Possible Statistics to Share at Staff Meetings**

- Last month's production
- Last month's collections
- Number of new patients last month
- Number and sources of professional referrals
- Number of patient referrals from team members
- Number of patients who left the practice
- Case acceptance rate for the last month
- Percentage of practice in recall program

Start and end on time. If you set and stick to a time limit, you and all your team members will have a better attitude about the meetings. (Please keep in mind that the pediatric dentist tends to be the one person most likely to arrive late.)

Rotate the meeting chair. By rotating the responsibility for chairing the meetings throughout your staff, you give each team member the opportunity for leadership. (You also inspire support for the person in the role of meeting moderator.) The office manager can keep a schedule of who is responsible for each meeting, along with a file of reference materials.

Keep track of decisions. For every action that is decided upon, a deadline and person responsible should be assigned. The moderator should take notes to be reviewed at the next meeting, thus tracking the status of projects.

Make it interesting and fun. Begin and end the meeting with a humorous story or thought-provoking quotation. Ask each team member to give a progress report finishing the statement, “What I have done in the last two weeks to make our office better for patients/coworkers is...” Or, invite each team member to submit an anonymous suggestion that will save time, money or stress for the practice. Read the ideas aloud and ask the group to vote on the best idea. The author of the winning idea receives a prize.

Pay staff for their time. If you pay your team members for the meeting time, you can expect them to work as diligently in the meetings as they do in patient care – giving creative ideas, making strong suggestions and solving practice issues.

Job Description for Meeting Chairs

- Start the meeting promptly. Welcome team members individually and thank them for any contributions to the preparation of the meeting.
- Introduce each topic for discussion. Treat each topic as important, and note the benefit of the discussion if you can. If no one speaks to the topic, ask for comments once more, then call on someone. If more than one person wants to speak, keep track of who will speak next.
- Take brief notes on the major points presented. Summarize the points made on an as-needed basis.
- Keep the discussion on track. If a team member brings up a point related to a topic further down on the agenda, you could say, “Good point, though it seems more related to the next topic we’ll cover. I’m making a note of it; let’s save it and bring it up then.” If a team member brings up a topic that is not on the agenda, you could say, “I’m jotting down a note about that. It is an important topic; let’s cover it at the end as time allows.”

- Prevent interruptions. If members do not feel protected from interruption, quiet members will remain silent and the outspoken ones will dominate the group. Simply say, “Donna still has the floor; you are next,” or “I think Donna has another point; I’d like to hear it.”
- Encourage reticent speakers. For example, you might say, “Jill, you’re an expert at this. Will it work?”
- Keep your leader hat on. Remember that a leader’s job is to encourage and guide the discussion of others, not to voice more opinions than anyone else. Make your points only when others are finished or when the information is vital.
- If the team comes to an agreement, repeat the consensus on each decision. If not, determine follow-up to keep from stalling the agenda.
- Record action steps, assignments and deadlines. Circulate the information if appropriate.
- Clear the next meeting date.
- Thank each person for a specific contribution and for attending.

Effective meetings will bring greater productivity and professional satisfaction to your team. They will give you the opportunity to communicate essential practice information, develop a team approach to treatment, and effectively manage conflicts and concerns. Team meetings are essential to a practice atmosphere of trust, cooperation and mutual respect.

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