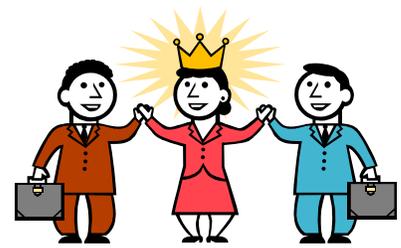


Communication - The Key To Office Harmony



We have all heard the expression *Failure to Communicate* and understand what the catastrophic implications may be from not doing so in any situation. Yet intra-office communications is the number one challenge facing orthodontic offices, reported by over 100 practices that I have surveyed.

Like any personal relationship, being able to talk honestly and openly in the office and with teammates is critical to the success of the team. Lack of communication is one of the predominant reasons that teams feel disjointed and may eventually break apart.

If this is not addressed on a regular basis and from the start – there is likely going to be trouble down the road. The idea is not to fix it – but prevent the entire process from getting out of hand! You can fix minor messes – reorganizing an entire set of office policies is one heck of a job – and will create more havoc than not. One of my favorite sayings is,

“Listen to the whispers so you don’t have to hear the screams”.
True in many different instances!

I have found that the best practices take the time to promote effective communication and realize that they can’t afford not to.

Following are a few areas of the practice that can be easily addressed to promote better and more effective communications.

Meetings

Each morning, without fail, before the first patient arrives, have all staff gather for a 10 -15 minute review of the day’s schedule. Talk about the upcoming schedule for entire day of patients and activities including and especially any unusual circumstances or events. If one of your office staff is not up to par – the rest of the team should know about. They certainly don’t need to be made aware of every detail but that member X is not their usual self – and to go easy. A little compassion goes a long way!



End the meeting on an upbeat note with a company cheer, mantra or expression. Everyone should leave the meeting feeling like they are part of a team and that team is part of something larger than any one individual.

A monthly or bi-monthly *staff conference* should be set up and a monthly calendar printed and posted well in advance. This offers the opportunity for those staff members who maybe frustrated with a “policy” or a person a chance to openly and safely voice their concerns. This is different from the morning meeting in that its primary focus is not about any particular daily schedule and more about operations of the practice.

At these monthly staff meetings, it works best to appoint a facilitator to create the agenda that should be posted in the staff room for a week prior to the meeting. This individual calls the meeting to order, keeps things focused and on time, makes sure that all attendees have opportunities to give input. No single person should be permitted to manipulate the agenda.

Part of the current meeting should be a review of the last meeting's notes. The goal is to foster teamwork in that this review will determine if those individuals who volunteered or were appointed to a task or function completed such. And what, if any, action needs to be taken further.

Newer offices or ones in growth phases may find it necessary to schedule these meetings at three (3) week intervals to reduce stress and improve logistics. While those practices that are more mature and settled may feel that meetings every six (6) weeks would be sufficient.

Gossip

This can be extremely disruptive and of those practices surveyed, they all reported **gossip** as the #1 cause of failure to even the best of high performing teams. This form of "communication" is so destructive and hurtful and yet it is rampant in small business environments and the orthodontic practice is certainly not immune.

Everyone must commit honestly, verbally and in writing to avoid it at all costs and to even make it grounds for termination. Go to the person who can do something about it, is the best motto when the gossip-urge strikes. - a non-verbal signal can also be helpful to tell the other person that this sounds like gossip and the conversation should stop right then and there!



Not only is **gossip** damaging to the team but can be considered to be damaging to the practice if overheard by patients. With the new **HIPAA** laws that have come into effect – this for sure can effect patient-practice communications regarding patient privacy, and must be regarded as a staff NO-NO!

Praise in Public and Criticize in Private

Praise and encouragement is critical in any relationship – be it a marriage or employment. Individuals, including the doctor, need to feel valued, respected and appreciated. This still seems to be a most difficult form of communication in many situations, yet it is probably the most productive; verbally pat your staff or your colleague on the back when they've gone above and beyond the "call of duty". Or when they have handled a situation or said something in an excellent fashion.

I like to promote having an "*I Caught* hear or see a team member doing good or proud, write it down on the "*I* it in the box. Read these aloud at Team



You Box". Every time you something that makes you feel *Caught You Form*" and drop Meetings and celebrate good

behavior rather than dwelling on the not- so great things that occur.

We all tend to improve when our efforts are recognized! Celebrate personal and professional milestones together whenever possible. And don't wait to do it quarterly or at the end of the year. I still maintain that a sincere thank you, a look straight in the eyes, a pat on the back all for a specific reason is the best motivator and great communication for all team members.

