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Teamwork: Every Dentist's Dream

by Linda Miles

Successful practices thrive when team members are in harmony with the dentist's vision and the practice's professional goals. Having a team of dedicated team players is every dentist's dream.

When I consulted with a practice that didn't display a high degree of teamwork, I asked the group to individually describe the word "teamwork".

Various interpretations emerged:

- Some employees described **teamwork** as everyone having a title and duties and everyone doing those duties daily, hoping the outcome is favorable.
- Others said **teamwork** is a group of people working together toward a common goal.
- Still others stated **teamwork** means enhanced communication from person to person for the betterment of the outcome.
- **Teamwork** has also been described as members seeing something that needs to be done and doing it without being asked, often without expecting acknowledgment for the deed.

All these descriptions are correct and lend credence to the others. In other words, they are all important to the overall success of the practice, satisfaction of the dentist and team, and service to patients.

Attitude

One of the most important aspects of being an exceptional team player is having a positive attitude toward patients, dentistry, and co-workers. Demonstrating "what I can do for the practice" versus "what the practice can do for me" is one of the best attributes of a true professional. One bad attitude can bring everyone's level of enthusiasm down. Coming to work happy and going home happy-tired (versus stressed-out-tired) is a goal everyone should embrace.

Performance

Performance at the highest level is exhibited when team members walk their talk daily and share extra duties. The opposite of this is having a "that's-not-my-job" performance record. Patients pick up on body language and attitude of each person in the practice. Those thinking they are above doing menial tasks are NOT true team players. Luckily, most of those who work in dental offices are true team players who want to be part of a winning practice. Their performance means more than just patient care.

Respect

When members of the team do not receive the respect they deserve, they cannot be true team players! Why? In order to give respect, a person must receive it. I've met some team members who were not treated well because their employers viewed them as a necessary aggravation. Sometimes the employer resented their salaries and transferred this lack of respect to other team members and even to patients. Ever wonder why some practices have eight broken appointments per week in hygiene while others have eight per month? One of the reasons could be the lack of respect from one professional to another. It is impossible to have a team attitude in a negative environment. Patients will not respect the hygienist's time to a higher degree than the dentist and other team members do. Respect truly plays a significant role in teamwork. People naturally support those who support and care about them!

There's an exercise client offices can do to improve teamwork. Each person:

- 1 Writes at the top of a piece of paper the definition of the word **"teamwork"** and notes one of the best parts of being on this particular team.
- 2 Writes the following: "One of my goals for this year is to become a better team player. List one thing that I can (or should) do to make this happen."
- 3 Passes the paper around the table and asks co-workers to write one thing, folding the paper over twice to protect the previous person's response.
- 4 Takes his/her own paper home and reads the suggestions.

In most practices, this simple exercise has been instrumental in creating an awareness of what one person on the staff needs from the others to enhance the team concept. Even the dentists participate as they are certainly part of the team! No one takes the suggestions personally and most practices report it was the best thing they have ever done to communicate needs from person to person. I've received thank you notes from dozens of people with comments such as "my dentist has a new employee since this exercise and it's ME." A few people have told me it was so effective in their practices they did the exercise with their families to create a stronger line of communication. It's all about improved communication, which is the major challenge in most relationships.

What does it take to succeed as a team? One third of each staff member's value is the ability to do the duties they were hired to perform. This includes business staff, clinical assistants, and hygienists. The second third of one's value is the ability to be a team player and have a positive attitude. The final one third of one's value is the ability to be enthusiastic about dentistry and able to communicate effectively with each patient to set the stage for positive case acceptance.

When the entire practice realizes the power of the team in moving in the same direction at the same time with a true team spirit, the sky's the limit.



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Quote-Worthy

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

— Henry Ford