Building a better dental team

By Roger P. Levin, DDS

He couldn’t believe it was happening again. Dr. Robert Chatham just shook his head as he overhead the front desk telling a patient that she really didn’t need to get that expensive dental treatment right away. He had just spent 10 minutes making a painstaking case presentation to convince that same patient that she really needed the treatment. To make matters worse the scheduling staff had also somehow overbooked him that day. What added to the stress was the fact that two key staff members were away on vacation this week — that should never have happened. It seemed like some of his staff had no idea what the rest of the office was doing. Somehow, he had to get this group of people working together a whole lot better than they were. Dr. Chatham was stressed and frustrated, yet he was aware that his team members were feeling equally discouraged.

Solutions through improved communication and team building

Dr. Chatham’s practice was chaotic, and moving in the direction of a downward spiral. His staff communicated poorly and they clearly were not working collaboratively. What were the underlying issues behind this practice’s problems? Some personal conflicts among a few staff members were complicating an already poor level of coordination between departments. This situation arose because Dr. Chatham rarely scheduled staff meetings — leaving a critical lack of any official forum for staff to work out practice issues.

Dr. Chatham is actually a composite client profile, garnered from Levin Group’s 22 years of consulting in dental practice management. For clients with these issues, Levin Group would recommend a two-pronged approach, emphasizing communication and team building with the following steps:

Communication

1. Improve practice communication
   As the practice leader, Dr. Chatham had to begin with his own communication skills. He didn’t like to admit it but he had some room for improvement. He habitually distanced himself from staff problems, believing people were adult enough to resolve issues on their own. He had to admit this approach wasn’t working. Increasing his communication skills could make him a better leader. By modeling good communication he would also provide an example to team members — another function of a leader. Some areas to focus on included:
   • Active Listening. This means hearing what is said and what is not said. As business guru Peter Drucker asserted, “The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said.” Once he started listening, Dr. Chatham found that he was the last person to learn about a major staff conflict which the rest of the team had been painfully aware of.
   • Empathy. To understand where the gaps in communication originated, Dr. Chatham needed to put himself in his staff’s shoes. Looking at events from another’s perspective creates a better understanding of team members and their concerns.
   • An Open-Door Policy. The team should feel comfortable talking to the doctor about challenges in the practice, as well as any issues in their personal lives that affect work performance.

2. Plan effective staff meetings
   Dr. Chatham needed to schedule consistent occasions when his departments could work together and exchange ideas. Daily team meetings and monthly staff meetings could provide these much-needed forums. Besides reviewing daily activities, team meetings are a medium for discussing office policies and problem areas. Staff members can receive more intensive training at monthly staff meetings as well, where scripting and role-playing help reinforce the practice systems. Agendas should be developed before meetings to give the