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 overheard 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...
team time to prepare questions and comments. Monthly meetings can also feature a teamwork exercise. Staff members can take turns bringing a ten-minute “fun” ice breaker to the meeting. Ten minutes of the staff laughing together and getting to know each other better could be a big investment in building a stronger team, and would help dispel some tension in a practice like Dr. Chatham’s.

3. Develop the team’s verbal skills. Every aspect of the practice is affected by how well the staff communicates, especially customer service. Teams like Dr. Chatham’s need lots of practice with communication skills. Scripting is an excellent way to improve the team’s verbal skills, practice good communication and provide consistent messaging to patients. The scripts should incorporate:

- Positive power words to create enthusiasm, such as “terrific” and “great”
- Multiple patient benefit statements
- Value statements about practice’s services, including implants

Team Building

4. Implement documented systems. Out-of-date and poorly communicated systems caused stress and staff arguments in Dr. Chatham’s practice. Documented, step-by-step systems eliminate uncertainty, reduce confusion and dispel the miscommunication behind practice tension. Dr. Chatham and the team worked to implement documented systems in scheduling, patient financial management, case presentation and customer service. By documenting office policies, staff members could manage the office efficiently, and the doctor could focus more on patient care and less on administrative matters.

5. Train the team. With effective systems in place, training can then follow the newly established protocols. When systems have been documented in a step-by-step manner with accompanying scripts, team members will be able to follow these systems on their own. Doing things differently can be a little awkward at first, but the doctor and the team understand it’s necessary to improve the practice. When possible, the dentist should coach the team and provide feedback throughout the day.

6. Promote job ownership. Each position should have a written
job description that includes a detailed outline of responsibilities. Team members can update their job description and also write a task checklist of their daily activities. The exercise of updating their job descriptions and listing responsibilities will help staff take more ownership of their jobs. Additionally, each person will have a daily checklist to follow consistently and use for monitoring his or her own performance.

7. Show the team you care. When Dr. Chatham began to listen to his staff, he realized they saw him as distant and too busy to care. Team members want to feel that the doctor cares about them as individuals. Team building not only encompasses the team itself, it also hinges on each person’s relationship with the doctor. In smaller offices, it is far easier for the doctors to know each staff member on both a professional and personal basis. Regardless of the practice’s size, however, doctors should develop a strong relationship with each staff member.

A doctor can demonstrate caring for staff members in many ways—from sending cards or gifts on birthdays to allowing schedule flexibility for family events such as children’s graduations. Ways to show appreciation for staff can range from no-cost to very expensive. When the doctor has taken the time to think about each staff member as an individual, a strong foundation is established for building a high-performance team.

8. Make good times and shared occasions part of the practice culture. Have a monthly potluck lunch, or take the entire team to a sporting event or an amusement park. Periodically organize a dinner for the team at a local restaurant. Build some fun into the monthly company meeting by providing breakfast or having a drawing for a gift certificate. Buy the entire team a practice T-shirt or hat.

9. Get Buy-in Through a Bonus System. Once systems have been redesigned and the team is working efficiently for at least 6 months, Levin Group recommends implementing a bonus program. A strong bonus program not only creates an ownership mentality, but also can help significantly increase practice production.

Bonus programs should be based on some regular interval. One month is too short and one year is too long. Levin Group recommends that the bonus program be based on a collection model and a two-month cycle. It is imperative that all team members know where they stand relative to achieving the goal on a daily basis. The best way to share this information is to post it in the staff room and to review progress in morning meetings. The momentum and excitement will build dramatically as the team gets closer and closer to the goal. Once the team reaches the goal, the doctor can add to the excitement by having flowers delivered or holding a celebration at lunch or after work.

Conclusion
For practices like Dr. Chatham’s, establishing more reliable avenues of communication will help build a stronger team. Documenting practice systems and using scripts creates consistent routines that can be reinforced when the team discusses problems in staff meetings. Another key resource for doctors is help from advisors and consultants, who can guide practices to improved systems, better communication and increased staff retention. When all of these factors work together the result is a more cohesive team and a practice with increased efficiency and profitability.

Dr. Roger P. Levin, DDS, is founder and chief executive officer of Levin Group, Inc., a leading dental practice management consulting firm. For more than 20 years, Levin Group has helped thousands of general dentists and specialists increase their satisfaction with practicing dentistry.