Is personality causing a ‘disorder’ in your practice?

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

It is an unfortunate irony: survey a group of dentists and many of them will tell you that they chose this profession because they grew up enjoying working with their hands. Or perhaps they genuinely wanted to help people, and probably they always loved science. Maybe they knew they wanted a medical career, but didn’t want the physician’s way of life.

There are a number of very good reasons why people choose to enter dentistry. However, few would say they entered the field because their No. 1 desire in life was to spend day after day talking to people.

Even fewer would say they got into the profession because they wanted to be in charge of a dozen staff members or wanted to worry about making money or selling cases or dealing with an unhappy patient now and then.

The fact is that the art and science of dentistry attracts certain types of individuals, and most entered the profession simply “to do the dentistry.” Yet, once there, they quickly discover there is far more to succeeding in this profession than being an expert clinician. There is considerably more to being the leader of the team than being the one who signs the checks. In addition, when it comes to working with people, it is far more difficult than anyone ever imagines.

No one prepared you for the interpersonal tiffs that wear away your energy or the battles that take on a life of their own or the wars that cause you to consider walking away from your profession and never returning.

“Sure, everyone’s different but can’t we all just get along?” laments one road-weary dentist after another, exhausted from the stresses of trying to guide a divisive team through to some measure of success, day after day.

Yes, there is a lot more to being a successful dentist than being a good clinician. One factor in particular that is seemingly elusive but profoundly important is personality — that of the dentist and everyone else on staff. Years ago, personality clashes were dismissed as minor and inconsequential.

However, over the years, studies have shown those little “personality conflicts” can metamorphose into all-out wars leaving collateral damage rivaling that of history’s major battles.

Personality: Plus or problem? What exactly is this unwieldy thing called personality? There are a variety of traits and every person’s personality is composed of a combination of 16 categories. While people are different due to their upbringing and life’s experiences, their basic personality will fit into one of the 16 categories.

Introverted personality types, for example, enjoy spending time alone. They need to have quiet time for concentration and dislike being interrupted by the telephone.

They can work on one project for a long time without any interruption and can have trouble remembering to relax.

Extraverted personality types, on the other hand, love being around people. Whether it is to help people, for the first time, can see and understand their trust of the practice and the dentist to proceed with dental treatment.

In many cases, their dental conditions were not apparent to them and did not have any associated pain, so patients were completely unaware of their dental problems.

While we often tried to show patients the X-rays on a light box, this is not ideal for most patients as they have difficulty seeing the problems. Digital radiography changes all of that.

Now, dental problems that show up in a radiograph can be viewed on a 17- or 19-inch screen and the patients, for the first time, can see exactly what we as dental professionals can see. Once they see and understand their condition, they will be far more accepting of our treatment plans as there will be no doubt in their mind about the status of their condition.

There’s little doubt that digital radiography is still a very hot topic in dentistry. By my estimation, around 40 percent of practices are now digital and I expect that to rise to 60 percent in the next two to three years.

With the federal government mandating an electronic health record by the year 2014 and stimulus funds soon available, there’s no time like the present to get started.

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names and faces. They prefer to work alone and may prefer to communicate in writing rather than talking. Introverted dentists are more comfortable with introverted staff members who, like themselves, don't care to talk all the time. Unfortunately, this general aversion to communication can spell trouble for the practice.

The overall lack of communication not only affects treatment acceptance, it also has a powerful impact on team dynamics and the ability of the office to maximize the talents of the staff. To achieve the level of success that these dentists want and are capable of requires that they learn some extroverted behaviors.

'She doesn't care' vs. 'he's too emotional' Another dimension of personality are the “thinking” and “feeling” types. Other than the extroverts and introverts, this is the second greatest source of conflict among dental teams. This dimension relates to how people make decisions.

The thinking type will make an objective impersonal decision whereas the feeling type will make an emotional decision. The thinking type is usually very analytical and considers all the evidence before making a decision even if that decision is not pleasant.

On the other hand, feeling types make a decision based on how they feel about something. They are exactly as the word describes, “feeling.” They are usually very warm and compassionate, much different than the thinking types.

Thinking types are “bottom-line” people and call things as they see it. As
a result, they can hurt a person’s feelings but are totally unaware they have done so. Fairness is extremely important to thinking types. They are able to step back from a situation, analyze it for what it is and apply an impersonal solution.

Thinking types can come across as heartless, insensitive and uncaring because they naturally see all the flaws in situations and are seemingly very critical. Thinking types are usually motivated by a desire for achieving goals and accomplishments. They also feel it is more important to tell the truth than be tactful.

Feeling types: harmony at any price

Feeling types like harmony and will work very hard to make this happen. They will tend to be sympathetic toward other co-workers, even if those co-workers are not performing to practice expectations, and they need plenty of feedback and praise from employers.

They consider it important to be tactful. They dislike telling people unpleasant things and have an inner desire to please everybody. They can come across to others as appearing weak and emotional.

Thinking type dentists generally have better managed dental practices from the business standpoint. Their strengths lie in efficiently run systems and analyzing a situation if it starts to break down.

On the other hand, depending on the types of employees they are working with, they can have poor relationships with the team, especially if many staff members are feeling types. Thinking types tend to voice only their discontent because giving praise does not typically come naturally for them. They feel that doing so will come across as fake to the employee. Yet, all employees need feedback, direction and guidance regardless of their personality type — even thinking types.

However, for feeling type employees — and this temperament type tends to be most attracted to dentistry — this temperament type tends to be most attracted to dentistry — they can be crushed by a thinking type dentist’s tendency to only find fault and never give praise. Feeling type employees need praise regularly to help them achieve maximum performance.

Feeling type dentists will be apologizing and agonizing over the fact that their treatment plan is going to cost upwards of $3,000, so they’ll present it then hurry up and tell the patient that they can pay $50 a month for the next five years. Feeling type dentists usually have high patient bases because of their strong warmth and compassion.

However, case acceptance may be low because they are uncomfortable telling patients things that they feel are unpleasant, and their accounts receivables are often high. Dentistry requires certain parameters to be successful and every dentist and dental team needs to know and understand itself as well as others in the practice. Explore personality assessments such as the Keirsey Temperament Sorter in the book “Please Understand Me”.

In doing so, you will gain a far better understanding of yourself and each other. You’ll understand much more clearly why you work the way you do and how to maximize your personality strengths and address the weaknesses. Surround yourself with employees whose temperament types complement yours but are not necessarily the opposite.

Moreover, even though a dentist or a staff member may not fit exactly into a specific personality type that is considered ideal for certain positions, those willing to pursue additional training and improve communication skills can often make huge strides in achieving their professional goals and dreams.

For additional information on personality types and how they affect practices, visit www.mckenzie mgmt.com.

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