What is the key to managing stress?

By Roger P. Levin

What’s the leading cause of stress? Is it even possible to pinpoint one cause when so many variables operate in busy dental practices? It’s safe to say that every dental office experiences too much stress at one time or other. Some practices accept it as a fact of life, while others want something better. For them, total success includes having a low-stress practice.

Levin Group consultants have observed that stress usually results from a combination of factors. The most common problems are a lack of well-defined business systems, ineffective leadership skills and teams that are not as committed as they should be. All of these issues can be solved. The final result is a low-stress practice, which is the goal of every dentist who has ever gone into practice.

The Levin Group Method for Total Practice Success™ includes five steps doctors can take to have an immediate and positive impact on their practices:

1) Empower the team
2) Hold morning meetings
3) Revise the schedule
4) Improve communication
5) Become a better leader

Empower the team

The doctor’s best resource for reducing inefficiency and lowering stress is the dental team. Involve as many team members as possible in examining your systems. Everyone on the team will have valuable insights to contribute. Special staff meetings can be held to review the major systems such as scheduling, case presentation, hygiene, practice financial management and patient finance. Some strategies include:

◗ Ask team members to bring a list of 10 possible improvements to the next staff meeting.
◗ Organize an off-site, all-day retreat to focus on current issues and strategic planning for the practice. This approach creates an opportunity to bring people together, forge a team spirit and identify problem areas and solutions.
◗ Send your office manager to regularly scheduled continuing education courses to gain new perspectives and ideas on dental management.

Hold morning meetings

Once the team has been empowered, it is a valuable asset to a daily morning meeting. Conducting morning meetings before patients arrive is a surefire method of proactively organizing the day and minimizing stress. During these meetings, the doctor and the team must identify times during the day when:

◗ Emergencies can be seen
◗ Time crunches are likely to occur
◗ New patients will need extra attention from the dentist
◗ Any special situations may affect the day

Making preparations for what’s ahead on a given day will greatly reduce stress in the practice.

Revise the schedule

The backbone of the practice is the schedule, and it affects nearly every aspect of practice operations. Poorly constructed schedules can have chaotic results — frustrated patients, cancelled appointments, lost production and a stressful work environment for the staff. When this situation is left uncorrected, the practice risks losing good team members, thus creating even more stress for the remaining staff.

Examine how your practice schedule is constructed. For example, are there too many holes in the schedule? That’s a sign that appointments are spaced too far apart. This scenario increases stress for the dentist and the team.

Levin Group recommends to its clients Power Cell Scheduling™, a high-performance scheduling system using 10-minute units to accurately schedule appointments and allow more scheduling flexibility. Fifteen-minute units would result in under- or over-scheduling patients. For example, if a procedure takes 20 minutes, the practice using 15-minute units would have to schedule this as a 15-minute or a 30-minute appointment.

From one day to the next, the schedule’s format should be very similar. Mornings should be reserved for longer, higher-revenue procedures that make up most of the day’s production goal. Afternoons can then be scheduled with simpler procedures. Within this framework the dentist and dental team are less stressed. This type of schedule keeps
everyone on a steady, but not over-
whelming, pace while allowing the 
practice to meet daily production 
goals.

Improve communication

Look at any successful practice 
and you will see an office that com-
municates extremely well. Commu-
nication affects every aspect of the 
patient experience, ranging from 
scheduling an appointment to case 
acceptance. For the dentist, the first 
step in improving communication is 
cultivating clear, positive and well-
understood interactions with team 
members.

Throughout the day, the dentist 
has opportunities to coach team 
members, respond to questions and 
concerns, and motivate the team. 
Dentists should be providing positive 
feedback to team members through-
out the day. Don’t wait to recognize 
good performance until a staff meet-
ing. When team members perform 
well, tell them that day.

Clear communication and sup-
portive coaching become more criti-
cal as the practice grows. The dentist 
needs to inspire team members, indi-
vidually and collectively, to achieve 
the highest levels of success.

Become a better leader

A mismanaged practice is a stress-
ful place to work. Efficiency, pro-
ductivity and communication are all 
reflections of your leadership skills. 
Therefore, dentists who work to 
 improve their leadership skills can 
measurably reduce the stress in their 
practices.

Good leaders have learned to work 
through their teams — not around 
them. The most successful dentists 
have figured out how to delegate 
responsibilities to team members. 
Delegating responsibility accom-
plishes two things: dentists reduce 
their stress and team members gain 
a sense of empowerment. Staff mem-
bers want to feel they play an impor-
tant part in practice success.

Leading by example is another 
facet of leadership. Team members 
learn how to act by watching the 
leader’s behavior. A dentist who is 
positive and motivational inspires 
team members to act in the same 
way. Lead the way and your team 
will be sure to follow!

Conclusion

Chronic stress indicates that some 
 vital elements of leadership are 
underdeveloped on the doctor’s part. 
Dentists can remedy this situation 
by taking more proactive measures 
as leaders of their practices. Team 
members are relying on the doctor 
 to set the tone, solve problems and 
identify strategies to get control of 
problem areas that are sources of 
stress.

Yet paradoxically, dentists who 
 are working to become good lead-
ers learn to empower their teams as 
 much as possible. Dentists become 
 better leaders by tapping into team 
member's insights, abilities and 
skills. These five steps can help den-
tists become better leaders, build 
better teams and achieve total suc-
cess.

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