

Keep Your Staff Without Losing Your Mind!

Demystify Being a Boss (or Having One)!

Ask five dentists what keeps them up at night, and four will answer "staff". Why is that? Why do dentists find managing staff one of the hardest parts of their job? Why do dental teams struggle so much with effective communication? And more importantly, what are the long term effects on the practice from lack of attention to good communication and leadership skills?!

After working for 30 years with and for dentists and their teams, I have a theory. Firstly, the fast pace and immediacy of the work in a dental office leaves little time to concentrate on honing these skills. Secondly, many dentists are simply not prepared for the task of managing a group of people. Dental school teaches exemplary technical skills. People skills? Effective management? Not so much. Thirdly, dental personnel work in tiny spaces (I call it "small space syndrome"). That is where most of the dental team is the most comfortable. When we don't know what to do, we do more of what we know. That is precisely why that small space is easy to retreat to; why many dentists say they just want to fix teeth, not handle the myriad issues and problems that are part of running a business.

Over the years, I have come up with 10 easily duplicated habits and techniques that I believe demystify being a boss or having one. They address the most common issues and complaints that seem to confound anyone who works in a dental practice. I will succinctly summarize them here for you and follow up with more detailed information in further posts:

1. **LISTEN LIKE YOU'RE WRONG.** We are all guilty of listening with half an ear while we formulate our answer or rebuttal. Try listening with the mindset that something the person talking will say, is the one thing that is going to make your day; the one thing you need to hear today. My experience (and I know this from making my own listening mistakes!) is that this simple process changes the way people respond to you, and opens up communication like nothing else!

2. **MANAGE MOMENTS, NOT PEOPLE.** You cannot **MAKE** people do what you want them to do, or expect them to do. So stop it! Think instead about how you can manage the moment (the opportunity) that is right in front of you, right now. When you switch gears to thinking about how you can make every moment a learning opportunity, you let go of the frustration of people not doing what you expect of them. I use the 4-Ace approach (in my game, 4 Aces beats a hypertensive flush!). Affirm - "de-troll" the other person by remembering that they are a human being with feelings. Acknowledge - State your position and have them state theirs. This diffuses the tension and abolishes the 'silent treatment". Ask - get all the facts and details, don't fill in the blanks, make assumptions, or attach judgements until you know the whole story! Accountability - create a solution together and follow progress with something measurable.

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3. HIRE THE RIGHT PEOPLE. The first criteria for hiring should always be attitude. Second is skills and experience. Attitude and character cannot be learned, skills can. Listen between the words when you interview. Look for initiative, challenge, positivity, willingness to learn. You can easily teach someone which retractor you want, but you can't teach them to show up at work with a positive attitude! By the same token, if you have what I like to call "low hanging fruit" in your practice, find a way to let them go. They destroy morale and send the wrong message to everyone else about how you value each other.

4. THE NO-ASSHOLE RULE. Dr. Robert Sutton, a Stanford behavioural sciences professor, wrote a book call The No-Asshole Rule, about jerks in the workplace. I highly recommend you read it, and create your own rule or policy in your workplace about how you each want to be treated, how you promise to respect and treat each other, and how you will enforce your policy, whether it be the boss who is acting like a jerk one day, team-mates bullying each other, or "ass-hole" patients berating the staff. Anti-bullying legislation recently instituted applies to dentists, so this advice is extremely timely.

5. PLEASE LIKE ME! We all want to be liked, but when the boss is busy bending over backwards trying to get everyone to like him/her, it gets old really fast. We look to our employers for leadership, yet I see so many dentists lavishing gifts and organizing social events in an attempt to be liked. Being a leader means having 'fierce' or uncomfortable conversations, making uncomfortable decisions sometimes, and well....leading. Don't solicit weak friendship; demonstrate strong leadership - your staff will like you better for it!

6. MOI??? Whenever there is conflict, confrontation or chaos that goes unresolved, lack of leadership is at fault. There is a solution to every conflict, so if it continues to exist, there is a breakdown or absence of leadership. If you are the leader.....it might be you! Look at yourself first, before pointing fingers or tearing your hair out. What part might you be playing in the ongoing unresolved conflict? Are you enabling it to happen by not following up? Have you explored why your team is not buying into the solution? Did you create it or did they? What one thing could you do differently in order to get a different result? This one is hard to do, but goes an awfully long way to getting results!

7. DELEGATE, DON'T ABDICATE. Everyone in a dental practice has to delegate in order for the practice to run smoothly. We cannot operate in silos, independent of each other. No-one must delegate more than the dentist, yet I see so many dentists assign a task, walk away and wash their hands of the whole thing. I call this abdication because it is relinquishing responsibility. The task then falls onto the shoulders of an employee who has no real authority and carries no burden of risk - an unfair and potentially deadly combination! True delegation requires three steps; assignment of a task along with authority to make decisions, communication of expected results, and follow up with some kind of measurable yardstick .

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8. CAN AND ABLE - No that is not a spelling mistake. Capable and Accountable are two words that are not used nearly enough in a dental practice! There is nothing more empowering or motivating than being made to feel that we are capable. We tend to live up (or down) to other's expectations of us. Micro-managing makes us feel as though we are not trusted to do the job. Expecting perfection is not the answer, but trusting that a team member will do the best that they are able, usually results in just that. Holding each other accountable means that we all answer to each other and have the freedom and the right to expect that we will all pull our weight. It also means feeling safe to call each other on mistakes! Creating that environment promotes growth, learning and our desire to do a job well.

9. THANKS IS NOT A 4-LETTER WORD! It is a misconception that cash is the most desirable way to acknowledge staff. Our psyches crave appreciation and only when there is no other kind, will money suffice. Being made to feel that we are all truly valued and appreciated for our strengths, and our efforts, and acknowledged for the work we do, becomes a motivating factor for being the best we can be. Acknowledgement from our employers and our peers increases our commitment to a practice and a team. Take the time to express thanks, acknowledgement and gratitude to each other.

10. DON'T BE AN ISLAND. This strategy ties right back into the concept that dentists often lack, or are uncomfortable with, leadership skills. They will seek help from mentors and colleagues on any technical skill, and attend clinical CE courses galore, yet they are reticent to invest any time and effort on communication and leadership acumen.. I have overheard many dentists groaning to each other about their staff issues, in what are really just bitching sessions. I encourage dentists and staff alike to engage in coaching, mentorship and training programs for new employees, and to find mentors in colleagues that can really help them to find effective, long lasting, sustainable solutions to the challenges of working with others.

What differences do you think the application of these 10 simple, easy to apply techniques would make to your work?

Coach K - "I Make Dentists Smile!"



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