

IMPROVING YOUR DENTAL PRACTICE

CREATING A 'GREAT' TEAM

How are you really supposed to build a 'great' dental care team? The process of creating a professional, happy, efficient team from a collection of capable individuals has many facets. This article presents the Aquafresh Science Academy top 10 practical, real-life steps to creating a great dental care team, including how to nurture your team and get them emotionally engaged in the practice, while giving them room to operate effectively.



1. Be organised

Behind effective, satisfied employees are rigorous processes. Therefore, it is worthwhile designing, checking and documenting the processes that help your business run smoothly.

Write protocols for everything: case scheduling, hygiene and safety, financial management, IT systems, marketing – even complaint handling, stock checking and car parking. This way, people are able to do their jobs effectively from day one just by following procedure (at least to start with). They will learn quicker, feel better and work more productively.

2. Nurture your team

We've all heard the maxim 'treat others as you would like to be treated', and this can have an important bearing on our professional relationships. As a team leader, instilling this virtue in your colleagues can help you form and nurture a team of happy, enthusiastic, effective people. This will enable your colleagues to work together well, ultimately creating a successful dental practice frequented by satisfied patients.

3. Communicate openly

Failing to communicate properly with staff (and that means everyone at the practice) personally as well as professionally is one of the most common and most sticky traps that we can fall into.



Things to think about

Specific principles for nurturing your team can vary from practice to practice, and with different situations and team dynamics.

However, a central set of values which can prove important in all professional teams include mutual respect, openness, honesty, integrity and trust.

If any one of these values disappears, then the chances are that team dynamics will falter and eventually the team will fail to operate effectively.

If each team member is encouraged to be aware of their own actions and to live by these values as much as possible, you will be well on the way to nurturing a satisfied and effective team.

Remember – leading by example is one of the most effective tools at your disposal.

Emotional engagement

Creating emotional engagement in your team can be achieved in a number of ways – don't be afraid to be creative and remember that a happy team equals an efficient team. Why don't you try:

- holding informal staff gatherings every 8–10 weeks – use this as an opportunity to congratulate your team and update them on the progress of the practice
- instilling a sense of ownership over specific projects and assigning appropriate levels of responsibility for each team member
- giving team members the opportunity to suggest ideas for the smooth running of the practice or ways to improve practice processes
- offering free or reduced dental care for staff and their family members
- organising a practice outing for Christmas or a barbecue in the summer time.



On a daily basis: say hello, ask how people are and smile! Wait for people to answer in full before changing tack or addressing somebody else – obvious, but it can take significant effort to put everyone else's interests first on a busy Monday morning.

Hold a team meeting once a month, plus less formal weekly gatherings. Turn off your phone, speak openly about all issues and ensure that everyone feels that they've had a proper chance to make suggestions, give feedback and deal with their problems.

Not everyone is confident in a group situation. Sometimes you'll need to prompt individuals appropriately. This small effort on your part will be greatly appreciated by those affected.

4. Emotional engagement

Far from being a trite and outdated principle, getting your colleagues to emotionally 'buy into' their work and the dental practice is key to building a great dental care team. Emotional engagement doesn't mean that everyone has to be willing to die for their team or the practice – nor does it involve a lot of shouting, hugging or crying. What it does mean however, is that to get the most out of your team, you have to give them a reason to believe in and care about their work and the practice.

5. Deliver continual training

Unless your practice actively keeps pace with advancements in dentistry, your protocols, as well as staff's skills can rapidly become outmoded.



To ensure that patients are treated with best practice (regarding both products and protocols), plan for each staff member to undergo continuing medical education. The more enhanced their skills become, the more comprehensive, effective and efficient your practice will be. This will also show your colleagues that you are willing to invest practice resources in the enhancement of their skills, which will empower your staff and instil a sense of achievement in them.

More capable staff who feel that they have your respect and trust will take on greater responsibilities, relieving pressure for the whole team and giving you greater peace of mind.

6. Don't micro-manage

A managing or senior partner in a dentistry practice will, through experience and training, understand how to excel in almost any role in the business. However, it is in the best interests of the practice if everyone is allowed to do their job with a full sense of ownership and responsibility. If the senior partners are scrutinising every detail and getting intimately involved in every part of every job, the team is not going to flourish.

Things to think about

- Asking for thoughts and opinions on the business in general – beyond their individual performance and responsibility – encourages staff to share ownership of the practice and therefore deepen their commitment to it.
- Remember to share the ups and downs with staff members too.
- Everyone needs feedback and a chance to work on improving their skills as well as enjoy the fortunes of the business.

Partners who pick over everyone else's jobs, role and responsibilities might as well do it themselves. Both you and the team will prosper in the long run if you find good people, train them appropriately and then let them get on with their jobs. In other words, trust your training.

If you have done everything to nurture your staff – which, crucially, includes giving them sufficient room to operate – you will find them both capable and willing when the pressure is on. This proportionate balance of responsibility frees you to lead the team confidently, rather than coax it along.

7. Motivate and review

Give your staff something to work towards by setting realistic objectives and goals in consultation with them. For new employees and those in training, their full job description is a useful benchmark against which to monitor progress.

Just 10–15 minutes once every 3–4 months spent reviewing and discussing competencies achieved and areas to focus on will motivate new employees, while reinforcing your vision for the business and their role within it.

This can be supplemented in the future, and for more experienced personnel, with biannual performance reviews – which should be conducted in a manner and setting conducive to candid discussion. Set the agenda for the meeting and provide clear, objective feedback which will help shape your employees' progress and foster an atmosphere of open communication and trust.



8. Ask an expert

For larger, multi-function practices incorporating 'bread and butter' family work in addition to specialist orthodontic and cosmetic work, a specialist consultant can help build or reshape a team that suits your needs.

Your management staff may have sufficient expertise between them, but with high workloads and the pressures of running a busy dental practice, it could pay dividends to invest in the advice of an independent consultant with the time to shape your practice to its growing needs.

9. Deal in solutions

It may seem obvious, yet dealing in solutions rather than problems can prove difficult for any team, in both personal and professional matters. If team members are encouraged to think outside the box and voice possible solutions in times of uncertainty then a much more positive, can-do attitude is fostered. It is the sign of a successful team when people are challenged to think around an issue rather than panic and look for someone to blame.

In addition, if you've got good people on your team and you've equipped them



'Equip your team'

- Find out what your staff need and provide it. This could be new tools, computers, a better coffee machine, new whiteboard pens... even a more in-depth briefing or a social event.
- If the environment is clean, well appointed, up to date, comfortable and professional, your practice will run more effectively.
- Continual investment in the best training, equipment and support for staff gives you the freedom to expect proficiency and high productivity in return.

with all the tools they need to do a good job, there is no reason why the solutions they suggest won't be spot on. If you've also made the effort to make your team members feel involved in the 'solutions not problems' ethic, there is even more chance that they will feel empowered to approach you with innovative and effective solutions. This ethic will make everyone's life easier and help to build an even more successful dental practice.

10. Check your leadership

To lead anyone, you need to take them somewhere specific. 'Growing the business' and 'treating patients well' is taken as read. Staff will want to understand your vision and values; they need to know what sort of practice they work in – "here we do it like this because of these reasons..." and "at our practice the patients always get treated this way because of this..." and so on.

Leading is not simply about finding out where everyone's going anyway and then running to the front, or leading by 'noise' rather than action. We all know people who 'lead' only because they are the most experienced, loudest or most confident. Leadership in the dental practice, as well as other businesses, is not about being these things but about using the skills overtly and appropriately.

A leader must instil his or her own sense of direction and values in the team. Otherwise talented and/or motivated people will wander off looking for inspiration and reward elsewhere.

You don't need to be dictatorial or uncompromising on your goals – even though this approach might appear to work in the short term – but you do need to explain how and why you make decisions and make your team feel involved in the running of the practice.

Further information

AquafreshScienceAcademy.com houses a wealth of materials and resources designed to help you and your team function as an effective dental care unit. Explore our Practice Focus and Patient Focus sections for a range of useful resources.

