



## **Strong teams begin with doctor's core values**

By Larry and Janet Steward

Understanding the value of a strong team in your dental practice is one thing, getting there is yet another. While building a strong team might seem like a formidable challenge, a well-trained and stable team that's focused on patients is important to a practice's success for a variety of reasons, including:

1. Improved care from the patient's point-of-view. Patients can't always assess the quality of clinical treatment, but they certainly know how they feel about the doctor and the staff. Most patients expect exceptional treatment. Some will complain if they're unhappy but most don't. They just miss appointments, quietly leave or, worse yet, speak poorly of the practice to family and friends.
2. Less stress for the doctor. Poorly trained staff members create unnecessary problems, which can lead to office chaos and crisis management.
3. Better staff retention rates. High staff turnover is expensive and hurts productivity. Studies suggest it costs the equivalent of six months to a year's salary for each turnover episode. Unfortunately, when a team is under stress and not performing well, the best team members may tend to leave first.

So how does one go about strengthening the practice's team? A very successful model for dental practices begins with the doctor establishing or updating her or his core values and vision – also known as guiding principles – for the practice.

Once established, these values should be presented in a staff meeting, allowing time for questions and feedback. As team members begin to really understand and embrace them, the core values should then be integrated into staff manuals and position descriptions. They do require follow ups at least once every three or four months since they're of little value if left to gather dust in a file cabinet.

Core value statements can include a variety of guiding principles, but the more successful ones cover basic areas, such as clinical care, the practice's environment, and the doctor's attitude toward staff. While the possibilities are unlimited, statements shouldn't exceed five or so elements or they run the risk of becoming unwieldy. Here are some basic examples:

- Our Dental Clinic strives to deliver the highest quality clinical care in a warm and welcoming environment where patients are treated with respect and valued as individuals.
- Our Dental Clinic listens to our patients and is attentive to their needs to ensure the best possible dental experience. Patients are strongly encouraged to let us know about any concern and how we may improve the quality of their care.
- Our Dental Clinic management aspires to provide an exceptional work place for our staff and to value staff contributions and input.

A cornerstone of improving team morale and performance is ensuring everyone – patients and staff members – is treated with respect. The doctor who truly values the creation and maintenance of a warm, welcoming environment for staff and patients needs to say it often and then live the example.



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As professional management consultants, we begin a visit to a new practice by reviewing staff and doctor surveys and examining team quality and performance. We look for some essential elements to help improve patient flow and staff performance, which include:

1. Does the staff know and practice the doctor's core values or is there a need to create and introduce these guiding principles?
2. Do staff members and the doctor treat each other and patients professionally, warmly, and with respect?
3. If we were new patients visiting this practice for the first time, would we it is a warm, inviting place we'd recommend to family and friends?
4. Is each team member's position description current and accurate? Is there a system in place for regular reviews that include focusing on tasks *and* responsibilities for implementing core values?
5. Are there consistent communications systems in place, including daily huddles, weekly staff meetings, frequent feedback and positive praise for jobs well done or, as appropriate, proactive feedback that redirects inappropriate behavior?
6. Does the doctor perform regular staff appraisals that include elements of staff development, improvement and growth?
7. Do team members feel they can make suggestions and know that, while every idea can not be implemented, their contributions are valued and will be considered?

As teams continue to grow stronger some incredible transformations take place. Since the team is focused on patients and the doctor's core values, patient satisfaction increases, which leads to higher practice productivity and less doctor stress.

(Does your practice have core values you'd like to share? If so or if you'd like to hear what others have done, please email [Larry@themanagedentpros.com](mailto:Larry@themanagedentpros.com). We'll share responses with everyone who asks.)