MANAGEMENT & MARKETING

This column is compiled by JCO Management & Marketing Editor Ann Marie Gorczyca, DMD, MPH, MS. Every few months, Dr. Gorczyca presents a successful approach or strategy for a particular aspect of practice management. Your suggestions for future topics or authors are welcome.

Operating Principles for Orthodontic Practices

JOAN GARBO

Over the past 40 years, consultant and author Joan Garbo has led more than 2,500 seminars and trained hundreds of dental professionals and business owners in effective communication, team-building, customer service, leadership, and related topics. Her high energy, sense of humor, and enthusiasm give clients a renewed sense of purpose and self-motivation. To quote one client, "Joan says what every doctor wants their team to hear, and what every team want their doctors to hear." Here, she provides the eight key operating principles essential to managing a successful orthodontic practice.

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An operating principle is the way an organization puts its values into practice. While different organizations may have different values, and therefore different operating principles, over my 40 years of experience as a dental consultant, I have identified eight principles that are fundamental to success and growth. These eight principles interact with each other to build a successful practice, the way the many threads of a tapestry bind together to create an overall pattern.

Principle 1: Communication Is Your Most Important Tool

There are two critical components of effective communication: speaking and listening. Neither is as simple as it appears.

The first rule of effective communication is straightforward: if you want to be heard, you first need to listen. Listening to people before you speak will help you understand how they will receive your message. Keeping their point of view in mind, try to ensure that what you say, how you sound when you say it, and how you look while speaking all communicate the same idea. For example, if someone is intimidated by you, yelling will make him or her less receptive to your message, reducing the chance of a positive outcome.

The second rule of communication is to speak clearly. Be specific, especially when making requests. We often speak in generalizations and assume others understand particular words the same way we do. Consider the following story: One day, a wife told her husband that she wished he would be more romantic. He came home from work the next day with a bouquet of flowers, only for her to exclaim, "That's not what I think is romantic! I want you to put out the trash, offer to put the kids to bed, or ask me what chores need to be done." He was floored.

When you use words like "better," "improve," or "more," define exactly how something will be made better, improved, or increased.

Principle 2: Manage Your Conversations

It is important to include your team in the goal-setting process. If people are simply told what their goals should be, they will not "own" them, and without a sense of ownership, they will feel less engaged. Remember the following axiom: if you're telling, you're not selling.

When you meet with your team to review annual, quarterly, or monthly results, first ask, "What did we do that worked to produce these results, and what should we change or do differently?" Then ask, "Applying what we learned, what goals should we have for the next year?" Working together, come up with a plan to achieve those results. As the practice owner, you should always participate in such conversations. While your team works toward their long-term goals, check in periodically to ask, "How are we doing? Do we need to make any adjustments?" Each meeting should end with sincere praise for the participation of team members.

Principle 3: Integrity Is Not Negotiable

Your team will accomplish their goals more easily if it comprises people who understand and align with the vision, purpose, and values of your practice. You should start by hiring people with integrity. There are several ways to assess the integrity of job candidates; the first is simply to ask them to define *integrity* and explain how they have demonstrated it in the past. Candidates often consider integrity synonymous with honesty. While honesty is indeed a factor in integrity, I suggest broadening the definition to include "doing what you said you would do." Provide this definition, then ask candidates to share how they have demonstrated such integrity in their own lives.

If the labor laws of your state permit it, I also recommend performing a pre-employment credit check and full background check for candidates who reach the final phase of the process. What matters is not whether candidates carry debt, since virtually everyone does, but whether they take responsibility for paying it off.

It is just as critical for the practice owner to behave with integrity. As the saying reminds us, "How goes the leader, so go the followers." If the owner is late coming to work, fails to see patients in a timely manner, or falls weeks or even months behind on completing treatment plans, for example, it is unlikely the team will listen to his or her lectures about integrity. In leadership, "Do as I say, not as I do" is a formula for disaster.

Your workplace policy manual is another tool for maintaining integrity. Make sure that it is current and that every team member has signed off on it. Review the manual every six to 12 months. When a team member asks for time off or another human-resources issue arises, your reply should be, "What does the policy manual say?"

Owners who make decisions off the cuff or make exceptions to established rules open the door to a perception of playing favorites. Whatever the rules are, make sure that you, the owner, keep them as well. Once you make an exception to a rule, you no longer have a rule.

Principle 4: Underpromise and Overdeliver (Go the Extra Mile)

It is important to understand the difference between motivating people and manipulating them. Motivation is energizing, whereas manipulation has short-lived effects and produces unwanted consequences. In *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates People*—a must-read for every business owner—Dan Pink lists the three factors that truly motivate people: *autonomy, purpose,* and *mastery*.[1] The common "carrot and stick" philosophy of management is an example of manipulation, not motivation, because it presupposes that employees need to be bribed to perform. To speak to the heart of a person, focus on *purpose*. For example, at a team meeting or morning huddle, or before leaving for the weekend, have a "share of the day" (or week or month), in which you ask yourselves these questions: How have you impacted, improved, or touched a person's life? Have any patients sent thank-you notes expressing that they love their smiles and appreciate how you treated them? Have any patients enthusiastically greeted team members or given the practice rave reviews?

At team meetings, brainstorm how to provide service that "wows" patients. Have team members make up a list of the basics of good service—for example, greeting each person with a smile or always addressing patients by their names.

Engaging the team as you plan to create a great patient experience taps into the essential factors of motivation, providing employees with control over how they do their jobs (autonomy), stimulating their natural desire to make a difference (purpose), and allowing them to reach a higher level of achievement and fulfillment at work (mastery).

Principle 5: Gratitude Is the Most Important Attitude

I stand by the motto, "The attitude of gratitude determines your altitude." Such an attitude is an essential trait to seek out in job candidates. As leader of your practice, you should also serve as a paragon of gratitude, providing praise and acknowledgment for both major accomplishments and more subtle acts of teamwork and patient service. Expressions of gratitude should be made both publicly, in front of other team members and patients, and privately, whether verbally or in written notes. The key is to be authentic and sincere. For example, try telling someone you appreciate that she or he always seems to have a smile, is ready to pitch in, or takes great care with "difficult" patients.

A leader should also foster a culture of praise and acknowledgment among team members. For instance, at the morning huddle, ask, "Is there someone you want to acknowledge today?" Additional ideas are to create a "Wow" board for the team lounge, listing employees' accomplishments; hold "brag sessions" before team members go home at the end of the week; or plan surprise outings (such as lunch, bowling, axe-throwing, or miniature golf) for nonpatient days. Remember and acknowledge work anniversaries, and treat the annual "performance review" as an opportunity to work together, one on one, to plan the next step in each employee's career path.

The No. 1 reason reported by people for dissatisfaction with their jobs is a lack of appreciation. As the saying goes, "Praise—babies cry for it, and grown men die for it." To engender loyalty, ask yourself, "Would I want to work for me?" Do whatever it takes to be able to answer that question with a resounding *yes*.

Principle 6: When Things Go Wrong, Look at Systems First

The COVID-19 pandemic fostered a workplace malaise marked by increased absenteeism and a diminished work ethic. A contributing factor may have been that employees were still paid during business closures, which is counter to human nature. People want to achieve, to matter, and to be part of something bigger than themselves.

It's up to leaders to find and nurture the seeds of greatness in people. One way to develop talent is to ensure that your training process emphasizes "winning" rather than just correcting mistakes. The first step is to explain the reason behind each procedure; the next step is to demonstrate the task. Once the new employee takes over, keep the focus on what she or he is doing right. When a mistake is made, the trainer should ask the new employee to identify it and determine what should be done to correct it. This process should be followed by praise. To paraphrase architect and writer Buckminster Fuller, "Mistakes are great moments for learning." Awareness—both of what is working and what is not—is the first step of learning. Making it safe to learn encourages people to explore and expand.

Principle 7: Complaints Are an Opportunity to Improve

When the practice receives a complaint from a patient, the immediate instinct of the people involved may be to defend themselves or place the blame on one another, but the complaint should instead be seen as an opportunity for improvement. Welcome the complaint from the perspective that *awareness* is the first step of growth. In addressing the complaint, you can demonstrate your practice's commitment to excellence.

When a patient complains, instead of explaining why the problem exists, use language such as "I agree," "I appreciate," "I admire," or "I respect." For example, you can say, "I appreciate your telling me this," "I agree that this is a problem," or "I admire your commitment to your child." Such phrases reduce tension by enabling you to adopt the other person's point of view and positioning you as the patient's partner in finding a resolution.

When you discuss the complaint as a team, ensure that the conversation remains objective. The documentation process should cover when and where the issue occurred, who was involved, and what happened; once the problem is resolved, add the ultimate outcome to your documentation. During the team meeting, if anyone gets defensive or tries to justify his or her actions, redirect the conversation by posing questions: If you were to do it over, what would you do? Which system was not working and needs to be changed or improved?

Principle 8: Ask Questions, and Listen to Customers

Adults don't go to the orthodontist because they *don't* want braces. On the other hand, while parents may want their children in braces, the children may feel differently. In such a situation, aim to be "on the child's side" so that he or she can express the reasons underlying any reluctance. This will allow you to address the child's concerns in a way that maintains respect for his or her point of view.

Again, "if you're telling, you're not selling." This statement holds true whether you're training new hires, managing your team, or empowering patients. An experienced doctor can take one look at a new patient and already know the treatment plan—and that is the problem here. When the doctor and treatment coordinator approach the consultation from a mindset of "already knowing," they preclude curiosity and place the other person in a box. This will inhibit the relationship-building process—even though the relationship is the main reason for people to "buy." To create a foundation of trust, follow the adage, "If you want to be interesting, be interested." Show interest in the patient's life, hobbies, and goals. Even if you've seen 500 cases just like this one, find a way to be interested in this one. Tell the patient what is unique about his or her case and how this will determine the results that can be achieved. Demonstrate interest in what the patient thinks. If the patient's view is limited, you may be able to lead the way to broader understanding. To return to the first operating principle: once you have listened to people, they will be open to listening to you.

REFERENCE

1. Pink, D.H.: *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us,* Riverhead Books, New York, 2011.