Individuals play the game, but teams win championships

What it takes to build the ultimate practice unit

By Lina Craven, UK

It is said that all teams are groups, but not all groups are teams. What separates the two is the interdependence. A true team is focused on a common purpose; team members support one another and enhance each other’s work and contribution. Andrew Carnegie captured this accurately when he said, “Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.”

I know that achieving the ultimate team is possible, because when I was a dental nurse many years ago in America, I was part of an ultimate team. What made us great was our leader, Dr Tagawa. He and his partner had a very clear vision and they knew exactly what was needed from each one of us to ensure the practice achieved its desired results. In turn, each one of us knew that every challenge we faced was an opportunity for personal, professional and practice growth.

Practices with a motivated, focused and empowered team produce excellent results; consequently, patients who expect high and practitioners realise increased financial rewards. Achieving such a team is not pie in the sky, but it does require complete commitment from the whole team. Based on my own experience of being a part of a high-performing team and my observations as a consultant to practices, here are my key principles for the creation of an ultimate team.

Do not confuse being the boss with being a leader. Leaders set the tone for the practice. They lead by positive example. Successful teamwork starts at the top with leaders who provide strategic vision and establish team goals. Effective leaders clearly define their vision and share it with their team to establish a common purpose.

Any successful relationship can only survive if values are shared, believed and agreed upon, values like honesty, respect, integrity, commitment to each other, commitment to the practice success. Shared values help to build an effective team and to establish its culture, conduct, roles and policies. The key is to ensure the entire team agrees on the same values and is prepared to work by them. According to the world’s finest flight demonstration team (the Blue Angels, US Navy), “without shared values, peak performance isn’t possible” and “a team’s values must align with its purpose, mission, and actions.”

Every team member, from the leader to the cleaner, must learn to communicate clearly and effectively. Successful relationships are built on positive, honest and meaningful conversations, deal with conflict and accept responsibility for the success of other team members. When conflict occurs, it must be dealt with honestly, directly and openly as soon as possible and in line with the team’s adopted procedures and a shared understanding of one another’s roles. Cross-training increases efficiency and makes each person more productive and valuable to the team.

“Successful leaders embrace the power of teamwork by tapping into the innate strengths each person brings to the table.”

Blue Angels, US Navy

Every morning in Dr Tagawa’s practice as part of our commitment to the team, we would meet 5 minutes prior to the start of the day to prepare for the show. The head receptionist had a simple but effective system for updating us with vital information, including how many patients were due to arrive. The head nurse, Hiromi, had a schedule of visits and expected procedures as well as other duties. The head dental assistant, Reiko, had a list of patients waiting for their next procedure, and the head dental hygienist, Kuniko, had the daily lab schedule and upcoming appointments. This system ensured that everyone was aware of their responsibilities and kept the practice running smoothly.

There are many challenges that practices face, and it is the leader who needs to guide the team through them. Dr Tagawa believed in utilising his staff to their full potential and turned even his worst employees into the best. He often said, “If you want to be part of the ultimate team, you must be truly committed.”

Building the ultimate team does represent a challenge, but once achieved, it is hugely rewarding. There is no point implementing one principle in isolation. It is like baking a cake without the eggs.

Lina Craven is founder and Director of Dyna-Care Consultancy, based in London, UK. She is an orthodontic management consultant and trainer and has many years of practice-based experience.