Dental career or daily drudgery?

If walking through the door of your practice creates instant anxiety, it's time to ask for outside help

By Sally McKenzie, CEO

Recently, I was sitting with a small group of dentists during the lunch break at a dental meeting and they were commiserating, divulging their war stories from the “front” if you will. Obviously, in my line of work it is not uncommon to have dentists willingly share their often painful experiences. This was no exception. The dentists were talking about some major problems they were having in their offices.

One of the dentists, I’d say he was probably 45 years old, a mid-career guy — let’s call him Doc No. 1 — was asking Doc No. 2 (I’d put him around 55 years old and should be nearing retirement) about how his office schedules patients. Doc No. 1 explained that his days are a string of frustrations, stops and starts; frantically running until everything comes to a screeching halt. There was no rhyme or reason to how his scheduling coordinator is organizing the day.

In addition, his practice’s production was nowhere near where he thought it should be, regardless of the current economy: one day it’s $5,000 the next it’s $1,000.

Doc No. 2 asked him if he’s talked to his scheduling coordinator and Doc No. 1 replied with an emphatic, “Definitely. I’ve probably told her 100 times that I want to be busy.” He notes that when he brings it up, things will improve a little for a while but then it’s back to the same erratic production.

Worn down over time

It’s true: you can become cynical as the years pass. You deal with disappointments and frustrations. People you count on let you down. Principles you once believed in become hollow, and the professional dreams and goals you once had lose their luster.

I see this happen to too many dentists. I hear it in your voices when you call me, and I see it on your faces at dental meetings. Even after all the years I've worked with dentists, I still cannot understand why you are so willing to settle for a practice that you don't want. That being said, I do understand how this happens.

The reality is that most dentists are committed to being truly excellent clinicians. You are dedicated to your patients and to providing what is best for them. But you don't come out of dental school with management degrees or human resources experience. Most of you have never even considered writing a business plan for your practices.

You are not experts at guiding your scheduling coordinator in developing the best systems to create the most effective and profitable schedule for your practice. You see conflict on the team and want to run in the opposite direction. You want to pay your staff a fair salary, but overhead is a nightmare.

As committed as you are to providing the best for your patients, you cannot do so effectively if your own systems are struggling, your teams are dysfunctional little fiefdoms, or you are stressed out from the worry of paying bills and dealing with staff problems.

All the while I’m thinking to myself: Why are these dentists liv- ing their careers in such misery? Suffering is truly optional. These dentist desperately need the help of an outside management consultant. It doesn't have to be McKenzie Management, but they need someone to help them identify a plan of

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Searching for answers
In nearly 30 years of working with dentists, I know how incredibly difficult it is for dentists to acknowledge that they don’t have all the answers. They don’t have the training or the expertise to deal with the multitude of issues and problems that come up just by nature of running a business.

Yet, I also know that once they reach a point when they have had enough — when the thought of walking through the doors of their practice generates so much anxiety and unhappiness — it is often at this point that they will finally seek out a company that can help them realize the dream they had given up hope of ever achieving.

These dentists finally come to terms with the fact that sometimes it takes someone else besides the dentist or his/her spouse to look at the practice and objectively assess what is working and what isn’t; identify why production is down one month and up the next; figure out why a group of people cannot gel into a team; discover why collections, patient numbers and overhead aren’t where they should be in spite of a team’s best efforts.

Yes, it takes a lot of soul searching, but at some point the dentist decides that he/she is finally sick and tired of struggling. She isn’t going to compromise any more.

He has studied, read and attended all the practice management continuing education courses he can and to no avail. She has tried to fix it herself year-after-year. In the end, no matter what these dentists do, it seems that the same problems with the same systems or the same people persevere.

When a dentist accepts that he/she doesn’t have to have all the answers and picks up the phone to call for help, this is the point at which a dentist can begin to build an entirely new practice and, more importantly, an entirely new and satisfying career in dentistry.

Consider your practice. Aside from simply feeling things should be better, there are a number of tangible indicators that your office could benefit from bringing in a consultant, such as:

- You have holes in the schedule that go unfilled, yet patients must wait more than three weeks to get an appointment.
- You either don’t know what your patient retention is or it’s below 95 percent.
- Gross salaries are more than 20 percent of income.
- Overhead is more than 55 percent of practice income.
- There are no performance measurements in place to evaluate employees.
- Job descriptions are either nonexistent or unclear.
- Staff conflict is a common distraction.
- Practice production has leveled off or declined.

The list goes on, but the bottom line is you really don’t like going to work. I dare say, it’s time to hire a management consultant.

Check experience and references
There are many consultants out there, and, obviously, I firmly believe that McKenzie Management is the best. Yet, no matter whom you hire, you need to be completely honest with him/her.

Just as your work with patients, you need a consultant who can help your team implement systems that will benefit the total practice. You want a consultant who can effectively explain the recommendations, the “why” behind them, and provide access to training and tools that will enable the team to effectively implement your vision.

Talk to the CEOs of these firms and ask questions, seek references and talk to those references. Do the consultants you’re considering have a reputable company behind them? Do they have the expertise necessary to address the challenges specific to your practice? Will they customize their recommendations to address your needs?

Will they be there for you in the long run to help you overcome hurdles that will arise along the way? Do they offer training and educational materials that can help specific members of the team? Can they explain to you exactly how they have helped other practices? Will they seek not only your input, but that of your team as well?

Finally, will they tell you what you want to hear or will they tell you the truth? It is that last point that is the most difficult for anyone. Just like the patient who doesn’t want to be in pain, you’re likely not going to want to hear everything the consultant needs to tell you.

However, it is in listening that you learn and it is in learning that you can take the steps necessary to build the practice that you thoroughly enjoy walking into every day of your career.