How many times during the few days you work, how many times did you feel frustrated alone? How often were you faced with challenges? How many patients did you lose? Dentists become frustrated when they don't have the time to give their patients the care they need. They are frustrated because they can't give the care they want to give.

Most of the time they show up when they're supposed to and try to do their best, but they're just plain bad. But they are your team.

What if you could take the good days and double, if not triple, those? What if you could build on the strengths of each individual? What if each person could bring their unique skills, knowledge, guidance and personalisation to work and contributing fully? What if you could make all this work? Are you finding your team to be rather, well, a team? Perhaps it's time to turn those ‘what ifs’ into realities. Read on.

We spend a lot of time talking about dental teams — their effectiveness, their cohesiveness, their efficiency, their productivity, their entrepreneurial spirit, their passion, their efficiency, and their productivity. Google the word ‘teamwork’ and you'll find 25.5 million hits. Search for books on teamwork on Amazon.com and you'll find nearly 59 thousand to choose from. For all of our interest in teams — dynamics, operations, and teamwork — do we understand team advantages, the challenges, the team is largely in the Neanderthal stage in it’s evolution, still hibernating. As Ken Lencioni, leadership guru and author of the best-selling book “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,” describes it, ‘Teamwork remains the one sustainable competitive advantage that has been largely untapped.’

What’s more ‘teams’ are frequently composed of individuals whose skills are vastly under-utilised. According to I. Richard Hackman, author of ‘Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performance,’ most teams generally leave unused enormous pools of member talent.

Many dental teams struggle to truly maximise their effectiveness. They face the daily challenge of merely getting everyone on the same page let alone building the type of rapport that’s required. Often they simply avoid taking action necessary to create high performance teams. Dentists become frustrated with team members because they don’t like the way employees handle certain procedures, tasks, or patient interactions, yet they routinely make excuses for those individuals rather than give constructive direction. ‘Patty is new, so there’s a learning curve we have to consider.’ ‘Ellen is great at what she does, but she has difficulty dealing with a patient. ’Joe is a really nice guy, but he’s afraid to mention a problem until we have a crisis. ’

Conversely, team members complain that dentists don’t give enough direction, feedback, or refuse to hold others accountable. They’ll assert that the team’s low performance is due to pref- erential treatment or that the office’s politics interfere with any real effort to improve systems. Some team members will become immensely frustrated with their inability to fix what they see as a problem or inefficiency because the practice has ‘always done it this way.’ Others shun discussion of those issues that make fellow team members or the doctor uncomfortable for fear of making waves.

Workgroup or teamwork

Take a look at your practice environment. Do your office foster a culture of teamwork that is built on trust and respect or does it operate more like a workgroup? Many dental ‘teams’ function more like workgroups. In workgroups, people are primarily concerned with their own job and output. They have little or no interest in what their coworkers are doing. In fact, they see their coworkers as their competition. This ineffective at- titude leads to a loss of efficiency and production. The office feels disorganised; there is a general acceptance of poor or mediocre performance, running a ‘that’s just the way things operate here,’ attitude, and high turnover is common. Worse yet, conflict, turf wars, and pettiness are all too frequent.

In this type of environment, it is not uncommon for the doctor to discuss the value of taking steps to strengthen the dental team. They’ll dismiss or belittle the concept of ‘team’ with comments such as, ‘My staff and I work pretty well together, and I don’t want to spend time on inte-rableness.’ Intangibles? An ineffective team costs time, money, patients, staff, and stress — five tangible things, wouldn’t you say.

Answer the following questions about your team:

- How many times during the past year did you wish a mem- ber of your team would handle a patient, a procedure, or a sit- uation differently? How much do you think it cost your prac- tice?
- How many times during the year were you managing con- flict between team members? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How many times did you feel like one or more members of your team were heading in the opposite direction of the rest of the group? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How often were you frustrated by team members’ inability to solve problems or take neces- sary action? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How often were staff meetings either dead with silence or dominated by one or two people? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How many good ideas surfaced but were never implemented? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How many times did you hear the words ‘It’s not my job’ or ‘I thought that was Jane’s respon- sibility’? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How often were you faced with a two-weeks notice? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How many patients did you lose in the last 12 months? How much do you think it cost your practice?
- How many times did you feel like the practice should be do- ing better financially, that work should be less stressful and more rewarding? How much do you think it cost your practice?
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