The 10th Dimension – the power of 10

In this series of articles, Dr Ed Bonner BDS MDent, Sloan Fellow London Business School, looks at how to deal with difficult colleagues

Although it’s the preference of many dentists to be self-employed, and to work in a single-handed practice, many others feel the need to interface with colleagues on a daily basis. This may come within the community service, in a hospital or clinic environment or in general/specialist practice as a partner or an owner employing associates. High levels of skill are necessary to navigate through the choppy seas of human inter-relationships, but the teaching of these skills at a formal level is conspicuous by its absence. So it is left for individuals to work out their own sailing methods and map-reading techniques and it is no surprise that they often founder on the rocks of human conflict.

Loads of baggage

There is not one among us who does not arrive at work unencumbered by personal baggage: parental attitudes, lack of recognition for past work well done, today’s current issues, and the baggage of our preconceived ideas and our past experiences. These issues must be taken into account if one is to effectively manage the human resource and avoid human conflict.

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done, guilt over work not well done, peer pressure, incompletely-ended love relationships, slights real and perceived; the list goes on. You bring in a hundred kilos, I bring in two hundred more; this ship has no limit on the weight of baggage, but discord arises on which should be given pride of place in the hold. You don’t understand how important my mother is to me, I don’t sympathise about your lost lover. You are quiet, I am garrulous. I have a high level of word skills, which you covet; you are technically more dexterous which I envy. Surely the ship will sink with all this baggage. Is it realistic to expect us to work together, or even possible?

The short answer is that we have to learn to do so, because if we fail now we will fail the next time as well and the time after that too. Certain skills must be acquired; here are 10 of the most important:

1. Empathy: the ability to understand someone else’s feelings as if they were your own; placing yourself in the other person’s shoes.
2. Sympathy: compassion for someone else’s discomfort, pain or distress.
3. Non-judgmental attitudes: accepting that people are as they are and not as you think they should be.
4. Doing for others and allowing them to do for you: many individuals are far more comfortable doing part of another’s work, perhaps in the hope that the other’s perception can be raised. Yet, they may be less comfortable in accepting another’s assistance because they don’t want to appear indebted to the other person. Others are very happy to have someone else do their work but are unwilling to reciprocate.

5. Being able to give and receive praise: the One-Minute Manager says, “Catch someone doing something right! Don’t just catch them – tell them, even if it’s something very small, complimenting them by making a pleasant perfume. When someone praises you, don’t look for their motivation or doubt play the praise; smile and say thank you!”
6. Thinking about and understanding another person’s motivation: team members work best when they feel motivated, and become difficult when they do not. Try to find out what makes your colleague perform better and add your energy to assist in developing the upside.
7. Understanding the dynamics of relationships: this means understanding that how you communicate is at least as important as what you communicate. Always be positive and constructive in everything you do with another person.
8. Offering constructive suggestions rather than criticism: you are much more likely to achieve your objectives if you do not make someone else feel wrong, but merely suggest that here might be other ways of doing a job that might also work.
9. Being able to accept constructive or even unconstructive criticism: this is possibly the most frequent cause of relationship melt-down: people just don’t like to be told they are wrong, even if they are. Humility, on the other hand, often allows acceptance of criticism and earns the respect of the critic.
10. Learning that you don’t have to be right, and that it’s ok not to be: I was on a flight the other night. A young mother with three irritable kids was trying to keep her family together so that she could control them; the air steward was adamant that as they were the last on board, they just had to sit separately. The woman was getting angry, the steward more and more determined to apply the rules. The flight was delayed by 50 minutes, and the woman complained about the steward. He was within his rights, but shouldn’t have tried to prove it.

The key to success is to bring co-operation and ultimately ownership to everything that occurs in the practice. That way, everyone is responsible for the successes and no one in particular is responsible for the failures.

Since selling his prizewinning dentistry100 practice, Ed Bonner acts as a consultant (guru) and practice coach to the dental profession, working with individuals as well as groups of dentists. He can be reached at bonner.edwin@gmail.com