The 10th Dimension – the power of 10

In this series of articles, Dr Ed Bonner BDS MDent, Sloan Fellow London Business School, looks at the similarities between selling and coaching skills.

Sales skills?

What sales skills? Through the practical experience I have accumulated in many years of working with practices, I have come to realise that the area in which dentists are most lacking is in sales skills. Having to sell our skills was never the reason we chose to practice dentistry, yet unless we are able to enrol patients to accept that what they want and what they think they need is in fact different to their perception, we are wasting our time and those precious skills we have so laboriously acquired.

Need and acquisition

Consider the patient who has a missing upper premolar. What they want is a pleasing smile. What they need is a bridge. Their want and our perception of their need match perfectly, but unless we can convince the patient that the far from in-substantial cost of the treatment in terms of time, discomfort and money represent fantastic value to them, we will not get the opportunity to use our skills. So, how do we acquire the ability to be able to sell without embarrassment, something we were never taught at dental school? One possible way is to be coached by someone with the ability to sell to us the idea that knowledge, skills and techniques (their ‘product’) are valuable and worth paying for.

Achieving through coaching

Coaching is an activity that requires a particular structure if the desired outcomes are to be achieved. It has to have a beginning, middle and an end. This represents a sequence of events, not necessarily linear, but moving from a vision to a conclusion that is satisfactory for the coach and the ‘coachee’. An effective model for that structure is one described by Graham Alexander and Ben Renshaw in their book Super-coaching – the missing ingredient for high performance. The acronym they use for this structure is GROW: Goal, Reality, Options and Wrap-up. As I read this, it struck me that this was not only an excellent model for coaching, but also a brilliant way of describing what selling was about.

The elements of ‘GROW’ capture the key aspect of what coaching is and does, and what selling skills are about: enabling people to grow, to develop their capabilities, achieve high performance and gain fulfillment.

The GROW model

In coaching terms it is defining the topic for conversation or investigation and then agreeing measurable outcomes or output (define the GOAL). This is followed by describing the current situation, uncovering the salient issues and barriers, and finding out how the client (patient) really feels about them, free of pre-existing assumptions, prejudices, fears, generalisations and judgments (the REALITY). This is followed by OPTIONS: drawing out all possible solutions and selecting the preferred one. WRAP-UP is the action phase where we discuss all possible implications, obstacles and costs, commit to action and identify support.

All grown up

Following the ‘GROW’ model is ‘GROWN’ and ‘NAILDOWN’ is the fifth and quite possibly the most important dimension that requires you to get the patient to commit. This creates not only commitment but also accountability. You become committed and accountable to your coach, your patient becomes committed and accountable to you. Your job is to follow up immediately on the commitment, and once the job has been done, check that the goal has been achieved.

Application

Now apply this to the desire of your patient to have a lovely smile and their need for an implant or bridge, and you have an excellent low-pressure sales technique that works every time without you even realising that you are selling. Not surprising, because what you are actually doing is enrolling the patient to buy into your knowledge, skill and enthusiasm which somehow seems different to selling them a product but in reality isn’t.

As Abraham Lincoln once said, ‘A goal properly set is halfway reached’.

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