Why improving your practice is a mystery – part 10

Jacqui Goss asks: are you signing blank cheques?

When you arrive at your practice tomorrow, sign some blank cheques and give them to your front of house (FoH) team. Hand over your credit cards, car keys and iPad as well, if you wish. Now spend the day in your treatment room as usual. Do you feel any different from normal? Are you nervous that your money is being wasted, that practice profits are being squandered?

If your FoH team is not very much ‘on the ball’ and you’re not totally confident that they are you should feel similar nervousness every day – regardless of whether you physically hand them your valuable possessions. Your FoH staff are the portal which leads to practice profits, you shouldn’t overlook this otherwise you’re effectively handing them blank cheques.

They must treat every patient as though their wages depend on it, every enquiry as if it’s the only one for months. The knowledge and skills required for FoH (and all dental practice) staff to communicate brilliantly with patients and enquirers can be taught (I know, I do it) and learned (I know, I’ve seen it).

What’s more difficult is instilling the passion, desire, drive, fervour (call it what you will) to perform brilliantly every day and every moment of every day. There are, of course, ‘sticks’. Against this background of high unemployment, companies are finding it relatively easy to impose pay and conditions on workers that would have been unacceptable just a few years ago. But do you want staff constantly in fear of losing their job?

Let’s look at ‘carrots’ instead. One is a current buzzword, empowerment. If your staff (not just the FoH team) know the financial circumstances of your practice, they’ll appreciate how vital their role is in maintaining and (hopefully) increasing profits. Oh, sorry, did you fall off your chair at the thought of telling them how much you earn?
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When you're sitting comfortably, you'll consider these arguments. Surprisingly, perhaps, it's not just accountants and bookkeepers who understand figures. Your staff have loans, mortgages, credit cards and bank accounts. They make purchases daily and balance their own books - even if only on the back of an envelope. They appreciate that income minus expenditure equals profit (or loss).

They know if things are going well or not. They may have seen the 'profits down, costs up' headline in dentistry publications or on websites when the latest NASDAL statistics were released earlier this year. They notice your car is now three years old. They notice the holiday brochures you now bring in are for self-catering cottages in Derbyshire, not five-star safaris in Kenya. They know the size of your book and the size of cheques handed over by patients.

They know times are tough. They have spouses, partners, family members and friends who are out of work or cutting back. They watch the news, read newspapers, notice high street stores closing.

So, what am I suggesting - that you post the practice accounts on the staff noticeboard? No, I'm not. That would probably break confidences in terms of who earns what and, in any case, different people will put different interpretations on the figures.

Instead, I suggest you sit down with your practice manager (and possibly your accountant) and come up with some meaningful performance indicators that can be discussed at monthly staff meetings. For example, on average, how many new patients do you need each month to replace the numbers that are frequent? What percent increase in net profits will you feel empowered to perform brilliantly?

If you have a patient dental plan, don't just leave a pile of leaflets on the reception desk, in the hopes a patient will pick one up, but tell your team to talk to through with your patients and then hand them the explanatory leaflet. Give them reasons to recruit patients to the plan. For example, if you can increase the percentage of patients on the plan from 40 to 50, profits will be up by just over one per cent by the end of the year. That means recruiting X patients to the plan per month. If you currently have 1,864 patients on the plan and can increase this to 2,000 within two months, they'll be a reduction in the more expensive treatments. It might simply be a question of monitoring how often the telephone rings.

If these sound silly, be aware that the definitive survey of commercial construction in London and a measure of future office supply is under-taken quarterly by Drivers Jonas Deloitte – somebody walks around with a clipboard counting cranes on the capital's skyline.

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