Many things have changed in the profession over recent years. One thing that has not changed is the most frequently given answer by students enrolling onto non-clinical skills programmes, when asked “What do you want from the course?” The majority of new learners say: “I want to feel more confident in my work.”

The good news is that when asked in end of course evaluations, “What did you gain from the course?” in the response is always, “confidence”. From the trainers point of view this raises a few questions, beginning with: “What is the elusive ‘confidence element’ and how does training increase feelings of confidence and competence?”

The starting point to answer these questions is a dictionary definition for self-confidence - Macmillan Dictionary defines self-confidence as ‘a feeling that you can do things well and that people respect you’. Let’s look at these two elements individually.

Feeling you can do things well
They say that “practice makes perfect”. There is no doubt that we feel much more comfortable when doing familiar work tasks, than we do when trying something new. But if the technique used is poor, or the task unfocused and not fit for purpose repetition will not improve results. So to do things well we must be able to identify the required end results, so that we can plan ways to achieve those results using methods that recognise the needs of the patients, the dental team and the dental business. The skills for this are what the training must provide. Namely skills of audit and evaluation can be taught and applied to individual tasks, so that these are no longer empty tasks performed for compliance, but meaningful activities leading to tangible benefits, continuous improvement and increased self-confidence.

Feeling that people respect you
Something very few dental teams have truly understood is the immense power for the good that can be accessed by offering support and positive regard to your team colleagues. We have got the idea that teamwork involves trust and cooperation, yet no idea of how to support each other’s skills and confidence by showing them respect. Too many of the dental teams I work with have not got a working knowledge about what respecting colleagues’ means, or how to do it.

In my opinion some of the main reason for the lack of respect and recognition extended to dental colleagues are due to:

- The tendency to be task-focused, rather than person-focused
- A failure to thank colleagues when thanks are due
- Problem-focused blame, rather than solution-focused cultures

Each of these lead to feelings that colleagues are secretly pleased to see you fail, rather knowing that your colleagues are watching, rather than getting ready to stab you in the back. It is much more complex to decide how training can help with this as aspect of self-confidence.

There are many formats training can take; each format has its part to play in developing quality dental services when woven into an overall training and development plan. Macro aspects of training look at on the job instructions, how to do... Without doubt the confidence of workers is higher when they know what is expected of them and how to deliver this.

Macro aspects of training are the route to lasting confidence. This is because it provides ‘tools to think with’. This provides a working knowledge of proven theories and techniques so that people can master their responsibilities, not only when things are going well, but they have the resources to put things right when things are not going to plan.

Training to secure this level of competence for clinical for dental professionals is generally available, whereas this sort of quality of training for the non-clinical dental team lags behind. As a result the self-confidence of non-clinical dental professionals is lower than that of their clinical colleagues.

In June a meeting of non-clinical dental professionals, practice manager, trainer and dental media representatives met at Aston University Business School to form CASPER, Coordinators of Administrative Standards and Professional Education for Receptionists, practice managers and care coordinators. One of CASPER’s objectives is to increase the profile of quality non-clinical dental training and secure the confidence element in practices throughout the UK. Watch this space.

In search of the confidence element
by Glenys Bridges