

Orthodontics Straight From the Heart

A couple of years ago I was channel surfing and I stopped to watch a story about Steve Palermo. Since 1977, Steve was a highly respected baseball umpire who had gained the respect and admiration of baseball teams throughout the league because of his willingness to stand up to sometimes unreasonable arguments, and his record of fairness and accuracy in his calls. In July of 1991, Steve was at a restaurant in Dallas with friend and former football player Terrance Mann. When they heard a woman in the parking lot screaming, they rushed out to help her. Both Terrance and Steve were shot in the incident, and while Terrance made a full recovery, Steve incurred a spinal cord injury that put him on a long journey of recovery. He is ambulatory now with crutches, and his courage and tenacity has served as an inspiration to countless people.

One of the things he said that really impressed me was in reference to his surgeons and surgical team:

"I hope when the surgeon looks at my spine, he can see my heart."

While you and I are not operating on people's spines or brains or having to deal with life and death situations, Steve's message is meaningful whatever work we are engaged in. When a patient comes to you, do you just see the teeth, the bite, and the facial structure? Or can you see the person's heart in your examination and treatment? Are you so busy that you don't have enough time to spend talking with and getting to know each patient? Are your patients "people"? or Class I or II's?

The ability to relate to the patient/client as a whole person is one of the more critical distinctions in the patient's/client's perception of service. While it is not possible to maintain a steady growth and still spend as much time to "schmooze" the patients as you once did when you were building the practice, you need not sacrifice the "personal" touch in the name of staying on schedule. In fact, whether you are on time or not is another of those critical service monitors. So how does one deal with such an apparent conflict in commitments?

First, it's important to recognize that there are many factors that create the *experience* of relationship for people, and the amount of time spent is only one of these factors. The primary concern is what we do with the time we have; and second, what is the nature and quality of the conversations we have in the time we have for them.

Using just these two factors, it is possible to create an experience of being with someone in a very short period of time. Eye contact and authentically being interested in the other person are critical to the experience. For example, when the chair side assistants are waiting for the doctor to check the patient, are they talking to the patients about the patients' lives, their interests and hobbies, or are they talking to each other? When the doctor comes to the patient, is the assistant informing the doctor of something for which the doctor can praise or acknowledge the patient? Do you have a "brag board" or book that highlights the patients' achievements? Is the atmosphere in the office upbeat and joyful? These are but a few of the ways to make the patient feel important.

Everything about the practice should "speak" empathy for the patient experience. Noted author and speaker Ross Shafer defines customer empathy as "the art of seeing the transaction through the customer's eyes. It is the ability to identify, interpret and appropriately respond to the customer's emotional state—before, during and after the transaction." The experience of empathy for the patient transforms "customer service" as something to "do" into creating an *experience* of relationship and exceptional attention to patients. It creates a true sense of belonging for the patients and a feeling of being known by the doctor and staff.

Empathy does not require that you agree with or like the other person's point of view. It does require that you be open to another's point of view and to be respectful of it.

For instance, everyone has at least one "Mrs. PITA" in their practice. She's demanding, unappreciative, blames the assistant or the doctor for her child's lack of compliance, and is generally uncooperative. She seems to know where everyone's "hot" buttons are and how to push them. Often times, whoever is dealing with her will either brace themselves to "stand firm" with her or else give in to her demands as a way of getting her out of the way, even when it is at the expense of other patients' or team members' time. Both of these responses in fact lack empathy and only serve to reinforce the behavior that you so dislike.

An empathetic response would take into account what life in her shoes would be like, and then speak to her from that understanding. You may still stand firm on the policies and rules of the practice but the tonality in your speaking, your body language and facial expressions will be different and ultimately more effective. In addition, the conversations you have with patients often times are overheard by other patients,

either in the operatory or in the reception area; so an empathetic response, even to a difficult parent or patient, will be appreciated by others.

A practice founded on empathy must include how the doctor and team interact with and treat each other. Just as “charity begins at home” so does empathy. Just as the practice should be a place that patients enjoy coming to, so should the practice be a place that the employees enjoy working in. One of the main tenants of Disney’s philosophy of customer service is create a great working environment for the employees and they will create a great environment for the customers.

The doctor/employer need only ask him/herself, “Is this a place where I would want to work? Is this how I would want to be treated if I were an employee?” If the answer is “yes” then you are on the right track. A practice in which the doctor’s behavior demonstrates a “do as I say and not as I do” attitude fosters an environment of resentment. If personal use of cell phones and the internet are banned for the employees, then the doctor should also refrain from the use of them; if being on time to work is essential for the employees, then the doctor has no permission to be late. The doctor is the leader in the practice and needs to abide by the axiom, “as the leader goes, so go the followers.”

It is the doctor’s responsibility to set the standards of conduct for the employees and to make sure that those standards are kept in a fair and even-handed way. Holding people accountable for keeping their agreements and their actions is essential for personal growth and for the growth of the practice. How the doctor holds people accountable makes all the difference in the world: when someone makes a mistake, is she/he dressed down for it or is a mistake considered a great moment for learning; are employees frequently recognized and praised for what they do right or is the focus on what they did wrong?

Just as important is the respect and appreciation the team members have for each other.

Unfortunately too many people resort to gossip when they have a problem with someone. Problems and conflicts among people are unavoidable but gossip is not. Given the opportunity to communicate in a safe environment with a neutral party to facilitate the conversation and maintain respect and dignity for all parties will create a safe work environment that team members are proud of, and will support them in maintaining focus on service to the patients.

One of the primary responsibilities of any leader is to educate and develop others to fulfill on the vision and mission of the team. As Aristotle is credited with saying, “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” One way to make sure everyone has the same understanding of what it means to “see the heart” when providing orthodontic treatment is to have a meeting in which the doctor and team create the standards of heart-centered service. Draw from your own experiences of service, both good and bad, and design what the ideal experience for a patient would be; then commit to the actions and attitudes that will support the ideal becoming the norm in your office, and support your practice being known as providing orthodontics straight from the heart.