

## First Things First

Congratulations, Doctor! You are now the proud owner of an orthodontic practice and your future looks so bright you need sunglasses! At last you can be the decision maker, the captain of your ship of fate; you can start putting into practice all your good ideas from your (very expensive) extensive education, and begin fulfilling your long-delayed dreams...and paying off your student loans!

Ah, if only it was that easy! While you have spent countless hours immersed in the science of orthodontics, most likely you can count on one hand the number of hours devoted to the *business* of orthodontics. Your degrees have given you the right to practice orthodontics; they do not insure your practice will be successful.

When the (typical) new orthodontist walks into his/her own practice the first time, the only tools in his/her tool kit are orthodontic skill/degree and personality. If she/he has bought an existing practice, she/he steps into an already functioning machine wherein the staff have more orthodontic experience than the new doctor. Yet the doctor is in charge and expected to lead.

There are several leadership problems that new doctors face:

- They are ignorant of (don't know) business/practice practices

- They are ignorant of their ignorance (they may know they don't know but not how much they don't know)

- They think they *should* know and are fearful of anyone finding out they don't know

The most successful doctors know that they don't know and welcome the opportunity to learn *before* they begin making demands for change. Those who try to hide or deny their ignorance end up looking like the naked emperor parading through town believing he was wearing an elegant robe; or worse than that, they can come across as arrogant, unappreciative and uncaring.

The most important fact to grasp about successful practices is that the source of success is the ability of the doctor and staff to be in relationship—with each other, with the patients and with the community as a whole. Relationship! Not the degrees on the office wall, not the video games or the coffee urn in the reception area, not the game of the month or theme of the month decorations—relationship! The games, the coffee, the decorations are things used to support and/or nurture relationships. Without relationship as the foundation, what you do to market the practice ends up being gimmicky and slick.

So what's the new doctor to do?

The following are a few essential steps that set the new doctor on the right path. Please understand this is a starting point on a “journey of 1000 steps.”

As a general approach to introducing yourself to the practice, be empathetic to what the staff are experiencing. Some, maybe many, may not be too excited to see the change in practice ownership. There will be staff who had worked with the previous doctor for many years and have established a long term relationship with him or her. They may be sad about the change, nervous about what the change will bring, uncertain about their job security, feel uneasy about being “disloyal” if they accept you too readily, and experience a host of other emotions that staff go through in the transition process.

First of all, NO GOOD IDEAS for at least 6 months: no one wants to hear your good ideas until you’re familiar with theirs. One of my basic operating principles is: “If you want to be heard, listen first.” Don’t make any changes in the practice, including orthodontic treatment techniques, brackets, etc., until you fully understand how things are already working. If and when you do want to make changes, don’t just tell them what changes you are instituting but rather involve them in a discussion for change. Remember, the practice was doing well enough to entice you to take on enough debt to make your education loans look like pocket change! Find out and acknowledge all the things the previous doctor and the current staff did right; don’t just look for the actions they took, but also look for patterns of behavior and the way doctor and staff relate to each other and to the patients. Look for what you can build on before you start tearing down!

First week on the job:

Spend a day observing each department in the office and find out exactly what the staff do: reception, scheduling coordinator, financial secretary, lab, TC. Find out from “the front lines” what they do and why, what they think is working and why; what they think could be improved and how it could be done. Make no promises to change anything—just listen, take notes and let them know you have heard them. For added impact, at the end of shadowing each department, have the staff test you on what you learned.

Take the staff out to lunch in pairs and have it be a “get to know you” lunch...find out about their families, their hobbies, talents, anything special they want you to know about the practice and how to improve their jobs. Don’t make it an interview or interrogation but rather a social luncheon wherein you exchange information and start to create a relationship with them. For added benefit, make the pair of staff to be one person from the clinical staff and one person from the administrative staff...the added benefit being they may learn something new about each other as well.

First month on the job:

Host a “get to know the doctor” evening (5pm-8pm on two different days) for patients and referring doctors, complete with refreshments, with staff acting as co-hosts. Follow the principle of “If you want to be popular, be interested. If you want to spend a lot of time alone, be interesting.” In other words, find out about them rather than telling them about you.

#### First staff meeting:

Let the staff know your first job is to learn...about them, about the workings of the practice and how things get done in the practice. Let them know that your questions are designed to educate you and not to intimidate or test them.

Tell them what you admire most about the staff and what motivated you to buy this particular practice. Let them know that for the first six months or so things will be “business as usual” and that should you decide to make changes, you will involve them directly in the process before any changes take place.

#### First planning meeting:

Prepare an agenda that is distributed to all staff at least a week in advance and invite them to make suggestions as to what should be addressed in the meeting. Have the main focus of the meeting be establishing the core values of the practice. (A simple and engaging exercise to accomplish this is to have a flip chart available and have everyone participate in saying what their core values are for work and the practice. You will probably come up with a list of 30 or more core values like “fun”, “excellence”, “relationship”, “profitabililty”, “communication” etc. When the list is complete, as a group, select 5-10 values that all can align with by asking the question, which of these core values, when followed, would create the work environment that they could be proud of and that patients would be attracted to.)

Have each staff make up a mission statement using the core values. For example: “We are committed to establishing **relationships** that **nurture** all who enter our doors. We pledge to strive for **excellence** in all our endeavors, in a **fun** atmosphere. We cherish the opportunity to **make a difference** in the quality of life for our patients, each other and the community as a whole.” At the next meeting, have everyone read the mission statements they have crafted, then either vote on the one to be used, or you can select a committee of 2 to 3 staff who will use the submissions to craft a mission statement. When the selection process is complete, post the new mission statement on your web site, in your office and in your printed materials. Read the mission statement at the start of the morning huddles and staff meetings as a reminder of what everyone is there to do.

While all these steps are important, the most salient point to take to heart is that *relationship* will be the foundation of your success. Remember, this is a journey of a thousand steps, and these are just the first few to take. Oh, and one other thing...remember to get those sunglasses!

Joan is a consultant, executive coach and professional speaker. Over the past 30 years, Joan has led more than 2000 seminars and has trained hundreds of dental professionals in effective communication skills, self-expression, customer service, team-building, leadership development and other related topics that enable people to experience life more fully and accomplish their goals. To quote one of her fans, “Joan says what every doctor wants the staff to hear, and what every staff want their doctor to hear.”

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