

Sandy Roth's

Communique!

Unique and Challenging Concepts from ProSynergy Dental Communications

#92: *How Not To Lead*

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How not to lead

In choosing topics, I try to keep a healthy balance of ideas focusing on communication, patient service, organizational dynamics, management issues, team building, and leadership. In most cases, I present ideas to help you be more deliberate and intentional in your work. Every once in a while, however, it helps to outline behaviors which get in the way. The focus of this issue is leadership no-no's. Dentists who exhibit these behaviors may not be aware of the damage they are doing, so this might be a good time to do a personal inventory. Many of these no-no's may apply equally to your staff, but I encourage you to look first at yourself. The behavior you model is often your most overt form of leadership.

No-No #1: Bringing your personal issues to work. Nobody enjoys listening to the prob-

lems or personal issues of others for very long. As a leader you must make sure you don't allow your personal problems or issues to overflow inappropriately into the practice and consume time and energy which might be more appropriately devoted to patient care. I'm not suggesting that you keep yourself so secretive that no one knows anything about you. I do, however, want to make a distinction between simply identifying that there are personal issues (an aging parent, a successful child, a difficult time in a marriage, an unreliable car) and making those issues an ongoing topic of discussion with patients and staff. I like to think of the door to the practice as being lined with one of those blue bug zapper lights. When you pass through the portal, your personal stuff is zapped and left at the door. When you become a role model for a healthy respect for these boundaries, you earn the right to hold your team accountable along the same lines.

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No-No #2: Spending more than you can afford. Your practice is dependent on good fiscal management, and irresponsible spending patterns can lead to a stressed organization. Many dentists are gadget-crazy junkies. They spend their way from one magic pill to another rarely getting full value from any one purchase or investment. If you can look around your facility and see many "had to have in the moment" items gathering dust, it might be time to hold a dental yard sale and reign in the credit card. Spending more than you can afford (personally and professionally) puts the organization in jeopardy. Make a budget and stick with it. Your team will be more careful and efficient with resources when you are a role model for responsible financial accountability.

No-No #3: Resenting paying your staff.

Let's face it. The gap between the average dentist's income and the average employee's is huge. Of course you own the business. Of course you are the investor. Of course you spent many years in advanced education. Yet, your staff is entitled to a reasonable, commensurate wage and to be paid without resentment. If you don't feel an employee is worth the salary, release him or her and hire someone who will make you happier. The job mar-

ket is particularly tight right now and good employees are hard to find and harder to keep. Get used to the idea of paying an appropriate wage for the stellar staff you wish to have around you and pay them gladly.

No-No #4: Giving mixed messages. Your team needs a leader who is congruent and consistent. That doesn't mean that you must always be dead certain. If you are confused, say so. Your staff depends on knowing how you think and feel in the moment, and their ability to perform is often linked to your consistency. Don't agree to something without thinking it through, particularly if you are likely to regret it later. If you need time to consider a request, say so. Avoid playing the role of the agreeable nice guy if you consistently find yourself disgruntled about your sacrifices.

No-No #5: Playing favorites for no apparent reason. Everyone is entitled to be treated fairly, although that doesn't mean that people have to be treated the same. If you admire Susan's courage and that leads you to rely on her in tough patient situations, that isn't playing favorites, that's smart management. Let her and others know your perspective. If someone's performance displeases you, on the oth-

er hand, you must let him or her know that you expect something to change. Playing favorites is often a euphemism for ignoring or mistreating others, and that you must avoid. Give clear feedback rather than punish by withholding favor. Be straight and clear with your staff and you will encourage behavior you admire.

No-No #6: Changing the rules when it suits you or exempting yourself from rules you expect others to follow. Many a dentist will outline a financial policy for the staff yet either wimp out in awkward situations or alter the approach for self-serving reasons. The team is likely to be angry and feel abandoned when this happens. If you have difficulty quoting fees, stay out of it and let your staff handle these situations. And be careful about giving discounts to your golfing buddies or relatives when you've told your staff that there will be no exceptions. Policies must be conveyed carefully, and the team that is working to meet financial goals will feel undermined when they see you bartering dentistry for house painting or knocking a bit off the fee here and there so people will like you. Set reasonable fees and expectations and hold yourself accountable as well.

No-No #7: Being moody and sullen. If you want to lock your staff out, moodiness will do it every time. You cannot afford to become a victim of your own unbridled emotions, and it may require professional help to overcome this pattern. You are probably a better dentist than an actor, so don't fool yourself into believing that you can hide your feelings. It is too much work for people to walk around on eggshells every day, so deal with these issues in a healthy way and let your staff focus on the patients.

No-No #8: Keeping things to yourself; failing to give feedback and avoiding conflict at all costs. I've written about all of these things before. A closed book cannot be read. Your patients and staff must be actively involved in everything that has an impact on them, and you must lead the charge in these areas. Giving appropriate, honest and timely feedback is essential to improving performance. And if conflict is difficult for you, get some help in learning how to force yourself to address it sooner rather than later. Conflict is inevitable, so build your skills and address it before it becomes a major problem.

No-No #9: Expecting every buck to stop with you – the boss. You cannot do it all

yourself, and you will need strong, confident and competent people around you to carry the load. You must involve your staff in appropriate levels of decision-making and allow them to learn how to become responsible and productive. Authority must come from shared goals, not from you. Besides, that way is too hard.

No-No #10: Telling people to solve problems on their own. If people could easily solve their problems on their own they would have done so. You can't divorce yourself from events in your practice any more than you can handle them all yourself. Once a problem becomes public knowledge, it belongs to the entire group, and that includes you. Your leadership will initially provide the forum and process for problem-solving until the group learn how to initiate this on their own.

No-No #11: Letting things go until a nuclear explosion is detonated. You cannot afford to overlook problems or let them go unaddressed. You may not have the biggest perspective on the practice, so you must keep your eyes and ears open to the tune of the times. Pay attention to the culture in your practice and catch problems early when they are easier to solve. That is part of your business.

No-No #12: Answering in short, cryptic responses. Reveal, reveal, reveal. People need full explanations, guidance and training. You can't use verbal shorthand and expect your staff to understand everything that is important. Make the time to be available and be expansive in your communication with them.