

Cultivate Fruitful Employee Empowerment

Once upon a time, the savviest executive leaders at the top service sector companies discovered that liberating employees to use their powers and skills had a rippling effect on the company. They found that vesting employees with decision-making authority improved performance and profitability beyond expectations.

Just look at Southwest Airlines, an astonishing story of employee empowerment, productivity, and profitability. For 30 years, the company's executive leadership has woven employee empowerment into its formula for success.

Today, at a time when government bailouts failed and several major airline carriers have gone bankrupt, Southwest recently announced positive 2003 projections, posted over \$200 million in net profit, and is expanding.

APPLICATION IN DENTISTRY

Presented with the prestigious Kozemetsky Award for Branding Excellence, Southwest was honored for its "history of ethical behavior, respect, and integrity in the treatment of its employees, partners, and customers." Part of Southwest's secret is its belief that company employees have the ability and authority to achieve results for customers.

The company's frontline employees are expected to act and tell the supervisor later. And employees with more than 1 year of service become owners of the company. This leads to out-of-the-box acts of service excellence.

Can private dental practices have the same results, when employees are liberated to do their best? Yes. Employee empowerment is one of the main ingredients in successful dental practices. The most successful general dental practices are bastions of employee longevity, healthy team dynamics, and esprit de corps, with excellent delivery of care as a natural byproduct. The common denominator is employee empowerment.

With many dentists scrambling to find dental hygienists (eg, in Maryland the ratio is .4 hygienists to 1 dentist), dentists who understand the importance of empowering hygienists to the maximum extent possible are finding huge returns associated with this management philosophy. Hygienists specializing in progressive periodontal therapeutics have been empowered by their dentist-employers to diagnose, design, and present treatment plans, effecting lucrative practice gains.

These dentists have discovered the benefits of liberating hygienists' abilities in nonsurgical periodontal therapeutics. And their periodontal therapists are happy to be part of a practice where they are respected and have the authority to make decisions. While not all hygienists will fit this profile, those who do are proving their value.

LESSONS LEARNED

Unknowingly, these practices are business entities that have the same philosophy that made Southwest Airlines the success it is today—to

empower frontline employees. In these practices, a high turnover rate in the hygiene department is unlikely. Hygienists working as periodontal therapists appreciate the opportunities they have for collegial relationships and increased compensation potential, and will rarely leave such a practice.



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Some of the lessons we can transfer from Southwest Airlines to private dental practices include the following:

- **Delegating responsibility to the "line-producers."** In this case, it means delegating responsibility to the periodontal therapist. In particular, one of the delegated responsibilities should include achieving and sustaining optimal therapeutic outcomes.

- **Decentralizing the decision-making process on a horizontal plan.**

This means giving up turf battles over treatment planning and the word "diagnose." With very few exceptions, hygienists who perform at the periodontal therapist level are better trained and have more experience in intercepting the earliest signs of chronic periodontitis and efficiently executing the technical aspects of treatment than their dentist counterparts. Dentists who employ periodontal therapists welcome this level of expertise and readily cede control over the word "diagnose."

- **Providing the necessary resources for employees to get the job done.** Be sure to provide the training and continuing education necessary to help your hygienist get to the next level. Ensure that the physical environment (eg, equipment and safety engineering) is sufficient. Develop an operational structure that will support the increased workload and growth that inevitably come from promoting progressive disease management strategies. For example, you may want to allocate a dental assistant's time to work with the periodontal therapist. Integrate the business systems necessary to support the transition into progressive periodontal therapeutics (eg, production scheduling, financial case presentation, periodontal care tracking and maintenance, etc). This is a radical departure from the conventional dental hygiene department, but without the right support, the transition to this type of practice will fail.

- **Nurturing a sense of ownership in quality.** Producing quality is not something that dentist-owners can dictate. To stimulate commitment to building quality, the reward system must be modified to give periodontal therapists equitable compensation for a demonstrated ability of high production capability. This professional alliance is more an associate relationship than an employer/employee relationship. Most hygienists working as periodontal therapists are working in informal collaborative relationships with dentists and are paid on straight commission, very similar to a dentist associate who has no financial interest in ownership of the practice.

In associate relationships such as these, paychecks become a function of production or collection, depending on negotiated terms. Just as with



Southwest Airlines' line producers, the stakeholder relationship changes the motivation of the employee, compelling them to make good decisions and take responsibility for the business consequences of what they do. The cost of doing business will count far more to your hygienist.

BALANCE IN POWER

Those in leadership positions within a practice (ie, dentist-owners) should seize the opportunity to engage in broad-based thinking and strategic planning for the future. Empowered employees should be able to run the day-to-day business of dentistry with minimal oversight on the part of the practice owner, provided that management has carefully and correctly empowered its staff.

This frees dentists to do more coaching and nurturing of their frontline employees (ie, periodontal therapists). They can expand their own restorative skills through continuing education.

These benefits can be realized through a careful balance of authority and empowerment. Effective leadership involves respecting a delicately etched line between laissez-faire and overly controlling styles. Tilting too far toward empowerment may blur the lines of authority. By the same token, telling an employee that they have been empowered with decision-making authority and then overriding that authority has the inevitable effect of undermining both the employee's authority and the dentist-owner's leadership credibility.

Studies regarding dental hygienists' retention and attrition rates point out that, like Southwest's line producers, empowered human capital is directly linked to positive business outcomes. Determining factors in hygienists' retention included opportunities to use independent judgment and being recognized by dentists as coprofessionals.

On a final note, hygienists and dentists should not assume that these practice settings will come about instantaneously. The responsibilities and respect in the best of dentist-hygienist associate relationships are not doled out to hygienists indiscriminately; they're earned. This kind of collaborative framework tends to come about over time, and only when a climate of trust is created. ●