

Practice management - how to facilitate changes with less fear

Mihnea E. Strugurescu
Toronto, Canada

Many dentists I talk to indicate they would like to have a different result in their office, but they are unable to make the effort required. I believe that, while change does require effort, the primary reason for immobilization is fear. Whenever we try to effect change and to enter territory that is unfamiliar to us, we experience: apprehension. This feeling often manifests itself in the form of procrastination.

Fear of the unknown is a common denominator for everyone. You simply have to reeducate your mind to approach new concepts in a positive and exciting way.

Facilitating change on a regular basis will allow you to work in a more productive and less stressful environment. Achieving one's goals has an incredibly positive impact on every aspect of your life, not just career.

The first strategy in overcoming fear of change is to identify areas that prevent you from moving forward. It is the time you would have to commit, the cost of attending a course or hiring a consultant, the resistance you may experience from your staff, or is it just easier to maintain the status quo? Determine your fears and then ask yourself - "what is the worst thing that could happen if I went ahead anyway?" You will find that you cannot come up with any reason so terrible that it will prevent you from making a start.

For example, one of the dentists was struggling with opting out of insurance assignment.

He kept questioning whether or not it was the right decision. When I asked what was the worst thing that could happen, he decided it would be that his patients wouldn't accept it and he would have to continue to accept third party payments. In other words, he would be no worse off than he currently was.

With this realization, you simply have to train your mind to not respond to the little voice of doubt and negativity - the one that is whispering that you are on the wrong track.

Training your mind to shut out the negative is similar to training yourself to look in a mirror to work. The only difference is that one is mental and the other one is physical. It does require constant effort to train your mind to think differently but like all new skills, it will become easier with practice.

Now that you are working in controlling your inner voice of doom, take some time to determine what you would like your practice to look like. A mass of information from different venues tells you how your practice should look.

While it is important to be well informed, only you can decide what is right for your office. Depending on your monetary needs and other demands on your life, you may be content with a small, efficient office. Or maybe you dream of a large practice where comprehensive cosmetic treatments that incorporate all the latest technology would be performed.

Whatever your vision, create a list of what is necessary to make it happen. Should you still find it difficult to implement change, a consultant might be the answer. In addition to offering independent advice, the consultant can be the coach who will ensure that an idea is implemented. This could be a good solution for dentists who resist a proactive role.

A consultant would be able to view your practice from an outside perspective and offer the expertise necessary to advise you on an action plan. Think of it the same way you would refer a difficult case to a specialist. You trust that the consultant has all the training and experience that you lack in a certain area of expertise.

Ensure that the consultant you engage is understanding and supportive of your vision.

Although another perspective can be illuminating, some consultants prefer to work a cookie cutter philosophy that may not suit your needs. You ultimately want to succeed with your own vision.

I have also found that while our colleagues are trying to be helpful, they can offer too many opinions, causing you to second-guess yourself. Once you have researched options and reached a decision, remain confident and keep an unwavering focus on your objective.

With the knowledge of what has stopped you in the past to make changes, a clear vision of the practice you desire and an action plan, it is time to move!

Be sure to start with a single area of improvement. Too often, being overly optimistic will cause you to take on too many changes all at once and both you and your staff will become frustrated and more likely to fail. Schedule a staff meeting and indicate why you would like to see some improvements made in your office. If staff in your office understand the reason for a change, they are more likely to accept it.

If, for example, you would like to improve treatment case presentation and acceptance, describe to your staff how you think this might be improved. Ask for their feedback. Be sure to keep the meeting focused on a topic. If other areas of concern come up, have someone responsible write the topics down for another meeting. Set a timeline for changes to take place and write down who is responsible for each task. Results should be posted daily for everyone to see.

Remember: if you don't monitor it you can't manage it. You are responsible for making sure that everyone does what is expected of them. You

cannot expect your staff to be any more committed to your practice than you are yourself.

Results should be recorded daily and reviewed monthly. It can often take some time before change is obvious. Implementation of ideas can be reinforced at your morning huddle, but an analysis of what is working and what isn't should be addressed at a monthly staff meeting. If something isn't working as well as you expected, fine-tune your approach, based on your experiences and feedback. This is a learning experience. While your vision should not change, your technique might.

Once you are happy with the results of this change, decide on another area to work on.

By constantly implementing small effective changes, you will see dramatic improvements in your practice in no time. If you have not been proactive in your practice before, you can expect some resistance from your staff. Following through on changes is imperative to success.

Meet resistance calmly (but firmly) and reiterate what you have already discussed. Make it clear that you are open to positive feedback but not criticism. It may take some time for staff to accept your new style of management but if you remain unwavering, there will be gradual acceptance.

In conclusion, almost everyone fills fear at the idea of doing something differently. When you start to feel frustrated with the process, which you will, reread this article, adjust your vision and refocus. Remember that nothing worthwhile happens easily. Convert the energy you spend complaining or worrying about your practice into positive action. In today's fast changing world, it seems more important than ever to keep current.

That way you will not only enjoy a successful career but also a viable and productive office.

Correspondence to: Professor Mihnea E. Strugurescu, PhD, 745 Danforth Ave., Suite 309, Toronto, Ontario, M4J 1L4, Canada.