



EXPANDING PRACTICE

Up and running

Get your associate off to a smart start.

Finding and hiring the right associate is a lot like finding the perfect car. It may have all the style, personality and performance you're looking for, but you still have to get behind the wheel and navigate to your destination. Stepping on the gas is up to you. So is stalling.

In the world of associate integration, breakdowns are all too common. Follow these steps to get your new associate headed in the right direction, on the road to success.

Help your team help you

Though you may not realize it, your staff has the most important task when a new associate is hired: conveying their trust and confidence in the new doctor to patients. To ensure that your staff speaks from personal knowledge rather than from a script, provide opportunities and outings where the new associate is introduced and can get acquainted before the first day on the job.

Invite the new doctor to participate in a team meeting or two, or plan an out-of-office fun day for the entire staff as a way to welcome the associate to your team. Team members can learn about the associate's background and

get to know the new doctor firsthand in a relaxed, comfortable setting. This personal interaction will help the transition run more smoothly, as a familiarity builds between the new doctor and the rest of your team.

Of course, you still must provide direction to staff about communicating with patients about the associate's role. Just before the associate joins your practice, decide the specific information team members will communicate during the associate's introduction to patients,

Providing staff with talking points about the associate's background and role in the office will ensure consistency in these introductions. Give them the tools they need to comfortably and appropriately bring up the topic in natural conversation. "Did you hear that Dr. Smith joined our practice? We are pleased to have him with us. Dr. Jones interviewed a number of candidates, but waited until he found the right doctor to

BY CATHERINE ETTERS

help care for our patients.”

As the owner of the practice, be sure to talk about the new associate in positive terms to staff and all patients long before he or she arrives. “I’ve found someone who shares my philosophy and will be good to my patients. I do hope you’ll have the opportunity to meet him/her next time you are here.”

To further develop the team’s trust of the new associate, allow him or her to provide dental care to your staff. Give the associate credit for a job well done. “That’s a beautiful restoration. Dr. Smith did a great job.”

Patients will scrutinize the efficiency of a new associate. So provide your associate with the level of staff support he or she needs to build patient confidence and trust. Team the associate with your long-time dental assistant for the first three months after the transition. This will ensure best practices, put the patient at ease and provide the comfort of familiarity during the transition.

Assign the patient base yourself

If one of the reasons you have an associate is to help you care for your current patients, then you must determine which patients you will transfer and which you will keep. Don’t relinquish this business decision to your staff.

An associate who works two days a week will need about 400 active patients to stay busy. Ideally, you should have decided which patients to transfer weeks before the associate’s first day. However, if this wasn’t possible, determine patient assignment on a daily or weekly basis. While looking at the schedule during your morning meeting, identify which of your patients and

hygiene patients will easily move into the associate’s schedule.

As for dollars and sense, schedule an inexperienced, new associate so that production of at least \$175 per hour is maintained. A doctor with moderate experience should produce \$225 per hour. In a busy practice, experienced associates

Plan to mentor your associate for at least the first 12 months.

should range between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per day. To ensure your production stays on track, create a scheduling template.

Help associates get to know patients and build their patient base by scheduling three to four hygiene patients per day, and by having the associate handle most emergencies.

Pre-book hygiene appointments in advance into the associate’s schedule with new and reactivated patients or patients identified as easily transferable. Emergency patients should be seen by the new associate, and booked with him or her for routine care.

Mentor from day one

Absolutely, positively plan to mentor your new associate for at least the first year. Mentoring is critical to the success of integrating the associate yet is too easily forgotten or put aside for other matters. Even if your associate comes with experience and confidence, regularly scheduled meetings (see sidebar, page XX) are vital to the integration process. How else can you make certain the associate understands your philosophy of care and builds a professional relationship? Regular meetings signal the importance of quality within the practice, and help you monitor the treatment your associate provides. It also minimizes misunderstandings, and it gives you the opportunity to hear

HOW TO...

Market your associate

In order to make your associate an integral part of your practice, he or she must be a familiar and trusted face with your patients. Here are a few great ways to introduce your new associate to your current patients, as well as potential patients in your community.

Get personal. Before the transition, make sure your patients know a new associate will be joining you in their care by sending a personalized letter. In addition to introducing the new associate, the letter should explain why you’ve added a new doctor and how this will benefit your patients. Include the associate’s biography.

Make headlines. Make an announcement in the business section of your local newspaper. Some states require immediate announcement of the new doctor on site via signage. Know what’s required in your state.

Reach out. Make the associate a part of the local community. Have the associate join local organizations and reach out to the community to earn referrals, name recognition and build a reputation.

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concerns about staff or procedures.

As a transition consultant, I have seen the unfortunate consequences of not mentoring an associate first-hand. Consider one dentist's dismay when his hygienist showed him an x-ray and asked, "What do you think of that restoration?" The doctor identified problems with the margin, said it was awful and needed to be replaced. The hygienist then revealed that the tooth was in her mouth and the restoration was performed by his associate.

Or consider the practice where the young associate came to the office with some experience and was thrown into his position with no mentorship by the owner doctor. Because of his poor treatment planning and consultation skills, his case acceptance rate was low. He regularly recommended \$15,000 to \$20,000 in treatment, but did not have the presentation skills necessary to win patient confidence.

In this instance, I recommended that the owner and associate meet weekly to discuss the associate's new treatment plans prior to case presentation. Together, they acknowledged when the associate was in over his head and transferred the patient to the practice owner. Often, they shared the case to provide optimal care. Through coaching, the associate was able to present treatment plans with confidence. Case acceptance increased, as did the associate's production level and the team's respect.

Set boundaries

Although it is true that an associate is an employee of the practice, staff should respect and look up to the associate as they would any other doctor. One way to foster this respect is to include the associate in on performance evaluations to affirm that

Mentoring made easy

Teaching and mentoring don't come easily to everyone. Communicate honestly and openly by having regular meetings with your associate.

For the first six months, meet 15 minutes at the beginning of each day and before your team huddle to discuss the daily patient schedule with your associate.

Reserve 60 minutes once a week for case conference meetings to review diagnoses, new treatment plans and treatments in progress. These meetings can be barometers for clinical development and the need for CE. Also, be sure to encourage the associate to discuss staff or practice concerns.

After 12 months, case conference meetings can be reduced to once a month.

the associate is on a level closer to that of the practice owner—not the staff.

Staff will follow your lead in establishing a professional relationship with the associate, and will look to you for direction in identifying the proper role an associate plays in the office politics and environment. Associates who are treated as if they are "employees" will become part of the

staff. While teamwork is essential, an associate's relationship with staff should not be as confidante or buddy.

For this reason it is not appropriate to expect an associate to manage the staff. Instead, identify to the associate whom employees should go to with their problems and expect him to abide by it.

As a transition consultant, I once witnessed a situation where team members became more comfortable approaching the associate about matters that should have been addressed by the owner doctor. The associate intervened by taking the matter to the owner, which resulted in a less than desirable exchange between the two professionals. Because the owner never discussed the proper way to handle conflict in the office with the associate or staff, contention resulted.

Setting boundaries may seem awkward at first, but will help maintain professionalism on all levels.

A profitable journey

With a new associate on your team, the road ahead for your practice is much wider and expansive than before. Your ability to direct the journey will determine whether a more productive and profitable practice will come sooner or later in the roadmap of your career. By taking smart steps to cultivate a successful transition, you will help your associate, and your practice, thrive. ■



Catherine Etters is a practice management consultant specializing in practice transitions. Ms. Etters guides clients through every

phase of the process whether it be for new dentists, associates, partners or retiring dentist ensuring a smooth transition. She is president of Catherine Etters Inc. Contact her at 610-520-9677 or at c.ettters@att.net or visit her Web site at www.cettters.com.