

The Power of the Position: Building a Productive Schedule

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The pulse of any practice is based on how effective the schedule is. There are two ways to ensure a productive schedule and they go hand in hand. It is valuable to approach the schedule with a strategy or system in mind so that a day that runs smoothly and has the clinical team asking, "How can we have more of these days?" can be replicated. Consider what verbal skills might be required to make these days a reality. In this installment, we'll focus on using the power of your position to build a productive schedule using a solid system and strong verbal skills.

Templating the day into zones has proven to be a successful way to ensure a productive schedule. Zone scheduling is a successful method of dividing the day into morning and afternoon segments, each with its own strategy. Zone scheduling makes the most productive use of office time, patient demand and provider pace. Once you have experienced the zone scheduled day, you will never want to return to your old schedule. Imagine for a moment three patients in the morning and a bustling afternoon ending promptly at 5PM. Both doctor and staff have had uninterrupted time to complete treatment and tasks and the stress of the day has been eased. It isn't a dream; it can become a reality starting with applying the 80/20 rule to your schedule.

The 80/20 rule states that 80% of your treatment will be on 20% of your patients. The 80/20 rule should also apply for the doctor and hygienist's schedule. 80 % of production is scheduled from 8AM to Noon and 20% of the production is scheduled from 1PM-5PM. In

an effort to give uninterrupted time to patients who are on the doctor's morning schedule, the doctor should have enough time to start treatment and finish, with minimal distractions. After lunch, the remaining 20% of production goals are realized by scheduling the shorter procedures. Ideally, a second assistant or an hourly employed support assistant helps the schedule run on time. The assistant's focus should be on operatory turnover, sterilization, seating patients, and at the end of the business-day, preparing tomorrow's schedule.

It is critical as you learn and apply this new system to continually evaluate to further improve and be even more efficient. Each day should be reviewed by the Scheduling Coordinator or Office Manager to evaluate the strengths and soft-spots of the previous day.

The questions to consider as we check the "vital signs" for the day should be:

- How strategically are you scheduling?
- Are you allowing patients to dictate their appointment times?
- Are you following the 80/20 rule, thereby allowing time for production and time for tasks?

In reviewing the actual outcome of the previous days, it will allow you to make the necessary adjustments and corrections for the days to come. Some of these will be addressed by better following the Zone Schedule template, which oftentimes requires stronger verbal skills with patients.

The Vitals for Verbal Skills

How do you get a patient who wants an appointment for their crown prep at 2PM or later to accept an appointment in the morning where that appointment should be placed? By allowing the patient to feel that he or she is in control, you will run into little resistance when filling your production zones. It is important to focus the patient on the benefit to him or her throughout this scheduling process. What follows are common challenges you may need to work through in order to create the most productive schedule possible.

If the patient wants to come in at a certain time, which isn't appropriate in your schedule, you could say, "I understand that the afternoon would work better for you; however, the procedure Doctor has planned for you is a crown prep (or other lab fabricated procedure.) The lab picks up at noon to ensure the most proper fit of your restoration; therefore, those procedures are done in the morning."

If the parent doesn't want her or his child to miss school, your response could be, "I understand not wanting your child to miss any school time. However, because this will be a long procedure, a child's dental experience is most positive when he or she is well rested and here for the first appointment of the day."

In order for Zone Scheduling and verbal scripting to be successful, it must be addressed, learned and supported by all members of the staff. It does take some time and focus to learn and implement; however. It is the Scheduling Coordinator's and/or the Office Manager's commitment to the system that will help take the practice to the next level. Practices looking for greater success will profit from being strategic with regard to their scheduling and verbal scripting.