

Are Your Communications as Good as Your Crown Margins?



Effective communication is essential in a business environment.

During your dental school days, when your focus was giving painless injections and perfecting your crown margins, would you have anticipated the amount of your time and energy required to be spent on communications versus clinical dentistry? In fact, one of the largest impacts on your practice is how you communicate and ultimately lead your team. Many of the doctors that Burkhart's practice management division (Practice

Leadership Center) works with have come to this "aha" moment. They have chosen to invest their time and energy to enhance their communications in the practice as well as their leadership of the practice.

Dr. David Grow of Prosser, Washington has been in practice for 22 years, Dr. Brad Marineau of Portland, Oregon has been in practice for 19 years and Dr. Alex DeVigal of Berkley, California has

been in practice for 13 years. While these doctors are all in different stages in their dental practices and dental careers, they have dedicated the past year working with PLC to develop their leadership and communication skills, as well as other elements of their practices. Their growth continues, but I recently had the opportunity to talk to each of them about what they've learned so far and how it has benefited their practices. The following is what they shared.

How have you grown with regard to your communication skills?



Dr. Grow: I think as a result of all the principles we have been learning, I can now go back and analyze how I've been communicating. Overall, my whole communication style has improved. It's not like I'm now an extrovert, but now I am more comfortable communicating with staff and patients.



Dr. Marineau: My Communication is better and improving. It is a very positive feeling to keep taking steps toward better communication. I can now talk about the direction we are going in and follow up better with team members. Communication from the team to me has also improved. We have a common language now, and we know the why behind what we are doing; this has naturally made things better in the practice.



Dr. DeVigal: My nature is to show how I feel versus saying how I feel, so I continue to work on this area. My communication with patients is better. The scripting and then practicing that scripting has been very helpful. I am making the verbiage my own and getting comfortable with it. Knowing what I need to say has made a big difference, and as I work with it, it becomes second nature. Practice, practice, practice is key. That is what's helping me move out of what is habitual for me.

How have you grown in your leadership?



Dr. Grow: I've always felt I had the characteristics inherently to be a good leader. Recently, I've had the total realization that unless I start to empower my staff, those leadership skills only go so far. I was only getting as much out of the practice

"The team is discussing how we will handle things & asking, 'What have we learned that will help us get to goal?' It is mentally refreshing to hear this; I have more energy."

- Dr. David Grow, Prosser, WA

as I had the energy to put into it. By not micromanaging but by training the team and allowing them to do it as they've been trained, I have seen continued growth in my practice. I realized I was in the way. I'm getting out of the way more now. Before I felt that it was going to be very difficult to make goal. I felt it was all on me, and I just didn't have the energy or the time; now it is totally different. The team is discussing how we will handle things and asking, "What have we learned that will help us get to goal?" It is mentally refreshing to hear this; I have more energy.



Dr. Marineau: I see this being tied into the changes in my communication. With the help and guidance I've received from PLC, I now have a road map to follow. I have a better understanding of the business aspects of dentistry; previously, I just avoided all that stuff. My team has been doing this for twenty-five years; they are very capable. I never really followed up; I assumed all was well. At that point, we got on the hamster wheel, and I was too busy to sit down and see what was happening in the practice. We got to the point where the tail was wagging the dog; our schedule was so challenging. This was the frustration and ultimately the desperation that brought me to PLC. Systems are in place now, things are improving.



Dr. DeVigal: Through my eyes it has been a slow growth. From my perspective, the leader should command attention when he/she walks into a room, and I'm not there yet. Since the departure of

one team member, there has been a change, and the team seems to have moved me up a little on the leadership ladder. They respect me as their boss and leader of the practice and, more importantly, as a person. I don't want to be feared in the fact that I can hire and fire. I want a mutual respect, and we have that.

When we start working with some doctors, they see communication as really being about confrontation, rather than about seeking clarity. Where were you on the spectrum when you started and where are you now?



Dr. Grow: I held back when I needed to confront behavior. I am still working on this, but it is less of an issue. I am able to clarify more often and more readily. Before, I would stew over it and wait until the challenge became such a boil I had to lance it; that was messy for everyone. Now, I catch it earlier, and we can talk about it in a positive way. I can simply state, "This is what we agreed to. What do you see going on here? Does it match what we agreed to?" When you procrastinate it helps no one; when I talk about it now, it isn't a big issue and the team member often goes, "Okay, you're right." I have realized there is no need to be afraid of the discussion since it has moved from a confrontation to a clarification question. I just ask what's going on. This applies to our patients as well. I find as I clarify with patients, it helps them recognize what we can do for them in our practice.

Continued on the next page...



Dr. Marineau: I have made a large change with our patients in this regard. In my practice, I haven't had a patient shortage, and I probably had about 100 "watches" out there. Now I am able to be more proactive by asking clarifying questions of the patient. I'm bringing up the cracked tooth now. I am asking more questions, I still have room for growth, I'm taking "What About Bob" baby steps at this point, but asking clarifying questions has made it more comfortable for me to talk about treatment with patients and work through challenges with team members. I've never been confrontational, but I feel now when I address things with team members, it isn't personal. I can ask, "How can we make things go better?" And it isn't a confrontation; it becomes a reminder. I can do a check in with team members and we know it isn't directed at one person; we are talking about things we can all improve on. We are all working on this together.



Dr. DeVigal: I am still working on asking clarifying questions of my team members; however, I am definitely more comfortable asking clarifying questions of patients now. The great thing about clarifying questions is that the patient and I both understand what the other person means when we say certain things. It helps me to make sure we are on the same page with regard to their treatment and the results they want to achieve. My expectations and the patient's expectations need to be the same for the patients to be happy with their smiles. It helps me ensure that I can give them

what they want. Clarifying takes more time, but it is well worth it; it is the difference between a profit and a loss with patients.

How has the morning huddle enhanced communication in the office?



Dr. Grow: We always had an AM huddle, but it has a much more focused agenda now. We are still fine-tuning it for what we are trying to do as a team. When we review the monitors together as a team and keep the numbers in front of us, we can proactively see ahead in the schedule. We can all continually be aware of what we are trying to do here as a team. When certain things come up in the huddle or in team meetings, I now ask clarifying questions: "Will this work for you as a team member? Will this work for us as a team? Is it good for our patients?" Instead of making all the decisions myself, the team takes more responsibility. My team thrives on this and it empowers them to do what they know is right, then I just put my stamp of approval on it to move forward.



Dr. Marineau: I never had an AM huddle prior to working with PLC. I couldn't see what we'd gain by having them. I assumed we all knew what we had to do. In retrospect, I now realize that little stuff would slide until it became a larger issue. In addition to the AM huddle, we are now having more office meetings. I've done a 180 on these meetings because now we have things to talk about and discuss rather than gripe about. Prior to holding

the meetings, we were a sailboat floundering in the ocean. Now that we have a destination to get to, we've got things we can proactively address at these meetings and the meeting time is very productive.



Dr. DeVigal: We had no morning huddle prior to working with PLC. The morning huddle forces me to start communicating right away as we start the day; it forces me to be more of a vocal leader. It is very positive and it has been better for the practice overall. The days go more smoothly. When we talk about potential treatment plan consultations, I can plan ahead and know that those patients will need a little more time so I get to the hygiene room earlier. The hygienist and I can go into our conversations with patients on the same page. The morning huddle has also helped us to schedule emergencies better. Chole has been terrific at following through on targeting patient referrals from the morning huddle as well.

It has been and continues to be PLC's distinct pleasure to serve these doctors as they grow in their leadership, communication, and ultimately the success of their practices. ■

"I can plan ahead & know that those patients will need a little more time so I get to the hygiene room earlier. The hygienist & I can go into our conversations with patients on the same page."

- Dr. Alex DeVigal, Berkely, CA