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LCP Dental Team Coaching (formerly Julie Weir & Associates) is recognized as the premier consulting firm specializing in pediatric dentistry since 1996.

The Secret to Building Leadership Influence: Treat Team Members Like Patients

Dentists are excellent at serving their patients in a manner that makes them feel well cared for and comfortable. The most successful practices extend the same level of care to their team members, radically increasing their level of leadership influence on their team. Outstanding leadership is not just about hitting targets and managing schedules but also about building strong relationships with employees.

One of the simplest ways to engage this leadership mindset is to treat team members in a way that makes them feel cared for, like customers, because they are customers. There are two types of customers: internal customers and external customers. Internal customers are the employees who choose to come to work every day to support all the practice functions. External customers are the patients and their parents who bring them to their appointments.

Influential leaders have discovered that how they treat their internal customers (team members) is even more important than how they treat their external customers. Studies have shown that when employees feel valued, appreciated, and respected, they, in turn, will treat the customer (patients & their parents) the same way. This style of leadership is much easier because leaders do not have to go into “boss mode” or “friendly patient mode”; they engage in “Influencer Mode.” As John Maxwell says, “Leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less.” Here are four strategies that influential leaders use to impact their dental team’s success:

1. They use Emotional Intelligence: After receiving feedback regarding last quarter’s PMM article on “Emotional Intelligence vs. Artificial Intelligence,” we wanted to provide more insight on this topic. Influential leaders recognize their emotions and how to manage them to maintain a positive work environment. They are also

perceptive about how their team members feel and can read the room in any situation. A great way to immediately increase perceptiveness is to follow comedian Craig Ferguson’s sage advice, “There are three things that I ask myself before I say anything. Does this need to be said? Does this need to be said by me? Does this need to be said by me now?” This simple mental exercise conditions the mind to be more emotionally intelligent.

Emotionally intelligent leaders prioritize listening and observing their team members. When they are walking through their practice, they look their team in the eye, acknowledge them and make them feel seen. Ronald Reagan once said, “The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. They are the ones that get their people to do the greatest things.”

2. They show Empathy: Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. Great leaders have this quality and use it to create deeper connections with their team members. When showing empathy, they put themselves in their team member’s shoes and consider how they might be experiencing a particular situation. Empathy requires active listening, an open mind, and an open heart. Showing empathy is telling and showing team members that their well-being mat-

ters. If a team member expresses frustration, feedback, or concern, empathic listeners build trust by demonstrating to others that they want to know their perspective rather than just sharing their own. Stephen Covey wisely stated, "Listen with the intent to understand, not the intent to reply." Empathy sounds like this:

- I hear you.
 - Please help me understand the situation from your perspective.
 - Please tell me more about that.
 - You have a great point. Let's see how we can work together on this.
 - I understand and encountered the same concern when I started here; this is what helped me.
3. They ask Great Questions: Asking great questions encourages team members to think creatively and produce their own solutions. Asking questions sends the message that they are trusted and their perspective matters. As leaders, we often feel the burden of always having the answer. However, before providing an answer, consider starting with an open-ended question for your team. Open-ended questions encourage team members to share their thoughts, often leading to an actionable solution they are willing to implement. In his book, 'Good Leaders Ask Great Questions,' John Maxwell says, "Good questions inform, great questions transform." The most effective questions are open-ended, starting with either "what" or "how."
- What are your biggest challenges right now, and how can I help?
 - How do you prefer to receive feedback and recognition?
 - How could we improve?
 - What motivates you to do your best work?
 - How could we make this easy or fun?
 - What skills or knowledge do you want to develop, and how can I support you?

- What do you enjoy about your role?
- What makes you feel proud?
- What is the outcome we want to create?
- What could we take away from this experience for future reference?

The quality of one's questions creates the quality of one's life. Influential leaders will ponder all these questions and act where needed.

4. They encourage Feedback and Recognize Achievements: According to a 2022 survey of dental team members by DentalPost, they found that:

- 82 percent had not discussed their progress with their employer/supervisor in the last six months.
- 65 percent think their employer/supervisor does not care about them as a person.
- 69 percent don't think their opinion matters.

As a leader, it is crucial to provide feedback to team members and encourage them to share their feedback too. Receiving feedback from team members requires leaders to be open to hearing it and willing to act on it. If a leader expects their team to accept feedback well, they must respond positively to their team's feedback. When encouraging team members to give feedback, leaders should ensure it is specific, actionable, and delivered respectfully. Feedback should often be about recognizing the team's achievements, not only identifying opportunities or areas of improvement. When giving recognition, leaders acknowledge the team's hard work, perseverance, and contributions to the practice's overall success. Appreciation can be expressed through a simple email, verbal recognition during a meeting, or even a small gift or award. Remember, a little recognition goes a long way. Celebrating the team's achievements shows them that their leader cares about their success and is proud of what they have accomplished. In the words of William Arthur Ward, "Feeling gratitude, and not expressing it, is like wrapping a present and not giving it."

Dentists and practice leaders are responsible for leading their teams in a way that makes them feel valued, trusted, and cared for. By using emotional intelligence, showing empathy, asking great questions, encouraging feedback, and recognizing their team's achievements, they foster a positive work environment where team members feel moti-

vated, engaged, and supported. Leadership is not just about managing tasks; it is about building influence. When team members are treated like customers, a culture of positivity and excellence is cultivated, which benefits the practice, the team, and the patients.

“Effective listening requires more than hearing the words transmitted. It demands that you find meaning and understanding in what is being said. After all, meaning is not in words but in people.”

Herb Cohen

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