21st Century Workplace Skills FOR THE DENTAL ASSISTANT

By Lori Paschall, CDA, CPFDA, CRFDA, FAGDA

March 2nd begins the celebration of Dental Assistant Recognition Week. As we honor the theme “Dental Assisting—Embracing the Changes of the Profession,” it’s a great time for dental assistants to consider the tools we’ll need as our profession moves forward, even if they’re tools that may not have been considered as important or relevant to the practice of dental assisting in the past.

Workplace skills for the dental assistant will require more than clinical applications, and we must start thinking more like business people than employees.

Dental practices are companies, and companies are in business to make money. Therefore, we must think like business people rather than employees. Employees do as they’re told, but business people figure out what needs to be done and do it. Business people are peak performers who are motivated by what is possible or what they’re willing to change. They ask different questions and enjoy the process. Business people bear full responsibility for their actions—employees don’t. Business people know they’re accountable for results and accountable to each other. Employees aren’t expected to see or understand the big picture. Business people know they must, and will.

Given the expectations of the professional dental assistant, what are the 21st century workplace skills that we need to incorporate?

• SELF-MOTIVATION—This is the ability to create value for yourself in the practice. It’s often said that dental assistants don’t produce, but in actuality the doctor and hygienist cannot produce without the dental assistant. This is also known as “Keeping One Step Ahead of the Doctor.” Being prepared, baring the same set-ups in each room, directing the doctor, knowing when and how to ask for training, telling and showing the doctor how your expanded functions create more time—all relate back to the overall production of the practice. Your ability to make a difference in the delivery of quality dental treatment is the difference between being a productive member of the dental team or not.

• CONFLICT RESOLUTION—Nobody likes confrontation, so it’s important to know how to handle the uncomfortable situation that will inevitably occur. Conflict arises due to an unmet expectation—it’s as simple as that. You need to be able to find the source of the conflict and handle it appropriately. Otherwise there will be resentment and blame shuffling.

• SALESMA NSHIP OF YOURSELF AND YOUR PRODUCT—What makes you unique and special in what you do in the practice? Do you have distinct abilities and talents? Promoting what you do best sets you apart and is what elevates you to professionalism.

• INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION—How are you communicating with yourself and your team? You must be able to communicate with yourself effectively first so that your message to others doesn’t die on your lips.

• THE ABILITY TO GIVE PRESENTATIONS—Does being asked to give a presentation make you weak at the knees? Does the thought of speaking in public terrify you? Consider this: every time you speak to a patient you’re giving a presentation! Learning to be comfortable speaking even in small groups is a skill that will always be important. It all comes back to communication.

There are a multitude of opportunities for dental assistants today that were not available a few short years ago. Dental assisting professionals are employed not only as chairside assistants and business assistants, but also as educators, practice management consultants, insurance representatives, sales representatives, and researchers. Being confident and self-assured is what promotes professionalism in the workplace. Don’t assume anything, and don’t be afraid to ask the doctor what a good job looks like. Have a checklist in place during the learning process. Know your strengths and weaknesses, and be willing to listen and accept that there may be a different way of achieving the desired results.

It’s time for us to elevate our own profession. Be organized, be creative and inventive, educate yourself, ask questions, be committed, take change where appropriate, and know enough about everyone else’s position in the practice to be supportive. Ask yourself, as a dental assistant professional, “Where and how do you want to see yourself and your profession?” If you don’t like the answers you’re getting, you need to start asking better questions. With this in mind, celebrate being a professional dental assistant, celebrate and elevate our profession, and celebrate Dental Assistant Recognition Week!

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When we look at the elements of a job, employees tend to just show up and get paid, do the work, and consider themselves, dare I say it, “just” a dental assistant. Compare this to the elements of the professional dental assistant: the knowledge that this is a vocation that requires not only an education and continual learning, but also that we educate others, create smiles, and have an impact on people’s lives. We need to get out of the mindset that we are “just” dental assistants sucking spit, and begin talking dentistry...