

The Need for a Well Trained Staff in Today's Economy

When I consult with practices a common question asked by doctors is: What if I train my staff and they leave? The best response I've ever heard to this question was...“What if you don't train them and they stay?”*

Consider the impact your staff has on patients and patient care. The first contact a patient has with your practice is on the phone. What is the impression made by that first contact person? What does your front desk person know? Anatomy? Basic Optics? Insurance details? Your background? How about your pre tester? Sure they know how to perform each task but do they explain the impact of that test to the patient? Does the patient understand the value of all your instrumentation? How about your optician? Can they explain the difference between a Hoya ID progressive and a Varilux Comfort? Do they know which lens to recommend and why? Are they confident enough to explain to a VSP patient why that patient should purchase outside their allowable? These are very important questions to ask, as we see changes to the economy over the next year each of these situations and many more will impact the economic health of your practice.

A well trained staff member will understand their role within your practice and the value they bring. If you are willing to invest in them, they will in turn invest a level of quality care to your patient. An important statistic to remember is 68% of patients that leave your practice will leave because of a negative experience with a staff member. A knowledgeable well trained staff member who is customer driven can maximize your practice value.

Question to ask yourself and staff–

If a patient tells your optician that they only want to purchase products covered by their VSP insurance, how would your optician respond?

Is your appointment book full? Is your front desk coordinator making the most of each phone call?

Is your technician communicating the value to the patient of your newly purchased OPTOS? Will your patient tell friends or family about your technological superiority? Or do they think it's just another machine?

Do you or your associates encourage patients with a minimal, or no prescription change to leave your office without selecting eyewear?

Whether you have a strong internal training program or rely on outside sources now is the time to fine tune the abilities of each staff member. Studies show that 70% of staff members don't understand what the doctor expects of them and 50% of staff doesn't feel properly trained to perform the skills expected of them. Do you really know what happens while you're in the exam room? Do you have a growth and development plan for your staff, less than 30% of supervisors have a plan in place to expand performance expectation of staff.

Here are some suggestions from leading PEN practices:

When sending a staff member to a training program, set an expectation level:

“We provide each of our staff members with a written list of tasks they must master and a timeline to achieve that. We meet with each staff member and set a plan to provide that training. Much of our training is internal but we survey our staff quarterly and ask them what training they feel they need and then seek out the programs that will provide them with that knowledge.”

Sue Dolan of Rockridge Optometry, states: “Prior to sending any staff member to a training program we discuss a list of the goals expected of them after attending the workshop. Each person knows what skills they are supposed to develop and they will present a written and oral summation of the program to the entire office at our staff meeting.”

Linda Boosembark at Dr. Wayne Schrader states: “We explain why we are sending a team member to a training program and how their responsibilities will change once they've completed the workshop and had a chance to practice their new skills.”

How do you insure new skills or knowledge is put in place?

The management team at Livermore Optometry: Alice New and Linda Lamendola have ongoing training and educational programs weekly. “We are in a constant state of training you can never stop learning.” “We have spot check evaluations of our optician's skills just to confirm we are all providing the highest level of care to our patients.”

“After a staff member attends a workshop, they provide our entire staff with a written summary of what they have learned along with a short oral presentation at our staff meeting” per Pam Kirkpatrick at San Ramon Family Optometry.

Once you've decided to send a staff member to a training workshop put a plan in place. What do you expect them to learn? How will you know the program was valuable? What are you willing to do to assist them in applying their new knowledge or skills? Plan to spend 5-10 minutes prior to the workshop to set an expectation level for the staff member. Meet with them again the day after the program to hear about their experience.

*Al Cleinman – Cleinman Performance Partners

Be positive and open minded to new ideas – avoid telling them why new methods or ideas won't work. This is your opportunity to motivate them to strive to improve. Follow up one week to answer any question that may have arisen as they test their new skills. Then one month later to confirm that the changes are taking place.

Remember your staff has the greatest impact on the economic health of your practice. Treat your staff in a manner that is consistent with how you want your patients treated. If you're positive, embrace change and support cooperation your staff will reflect those values.