

TRUST

Do you trust your staff? Most dentists don't.

When you don't trust your staff, what do you do? You unconsciously seek control. In order to gain control you pester, nit-pick, measure everything you can, ask questions repeatedly, pump certain staff for information, ease-drop, micromanage, spy, and become very paranoid about what staff is doing or not doing.

The more control you impose, the more you displace trust. The more you displace trust, the more you dislodge personal responsibility, loyalty, affinity, love and appreciation. The more you unseat personal responsibility, loyalty, affinity and appreciation, the worse staff performance becomes. The more that performance is diminished, the more results decline. Lack of performance and shrinking results causes you to apply even more control creating a vicious cycle. And you wonder why there is such high turnover in dentistry? No one likes being controlled.

So how do you build trust in a dental practice? Well one thing you don't do is measure.

When you review the literature, many smart people have tried to design measurements and related tools to measure subjective issues such as trust. However, none of these "feeling" states can be reliably measured. You can measure certain behaviors that only in some situations represent one definition of trust, but clearly there are many parts to trust that are not measurable.

Trust is too situational for any definition to be meaningful. For instance, there are times when trust means keeping your mouth shut about a staff member. There are other times trust means protecting a staff member from making the same mistake twice by speaking up. It depends on the situation. Therefore, trust is purely subjective.

Applying measurements to subjective dynamics like trust only distorts, or worse, discredits what we "know in our hearts." Just like quantum physics, the very act of measuring it, alters it. In the domain of trust, the rule of "if you can't measure it, you can't manage it," doesn't apply.

Any attempt to measure trust, directly or indirectly, leads you further away from it. It might trick you into a false confidence that meeting your numbers equals trustworthiness. But in many cases, hypocrisy thrives when metrics are valued more than personal experience when it comes to trust. There is an extended time lag between lost trust and bad numbers so once the numbers decline, it's too late.

So what do you do with things like trust that you can't measure? If you can't measure it, at the very least you better be managing it every day, with attention, integrity and brutal self-examination. Einstein said, "Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted."

Dentists today are being consulted to gather, analyze and attend to more and more measurements than ever before. This is beginning to separate them from their own good judgment and personal responsibility for addressing and resolving trust issues.

Trust and trustworthiness are inseparable. Trust in dental practice, as in life, operates along patterns of reciprocity based on assumptions about intent. Intent can't be measured. Reciprocity is the key element in trust. That's why the dentist must be fully trustworthy. The greater the dentist's trustworthiness, the greater degree of trust exists in the practice. So when staff behaves in a way that tells you they can't be trusted, better look in the mirror first. Since trust is a reciprocal – whatever you're putting out, you're getting back. It isn't them, it's you! If you want to increase trust in your practice, work on yourself first. Something is missing in your own trustworthiness.

I suggest that if you want to enhance trust in your practice, begin by completing an "integrity check list." List all those areas in your practice where you haven't done what you said you would, haven't communicated what you ought to have or have avoided saying. List those areas that you say you'll get to and never do. List those things you know you should say to staff members and find an excuse not to. List all those areas of the practice that are incomplete, like the budget, cleaning the hall closet, checking your deposits. I bet it turns out to be a pretty long list.

Now make legitimate promises to get these items complete. Put a by-when next to each. Then give your word and keep it. Trust is reciprocal. To have trust, you need to be trustworthy. The higher the level of your integrity, the more trustworthy you are. Now go clean up you act.

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A man who doesn't trust himself can never really trust anyone else.

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