



# Spread too thin? : The art of delegation

Simon Palmer

The dentist is the one team member in a dental practice that can practice dentistry and yet somehow their time and headspace often gets compromised by the myriad of extra tasks that are involved in running a practice. Talking to hundreds of practices we have often come across dentists involved in the minutiae of marketing, ordering supplies, IT support, handpiece maintenance and many, many more tasks that could be done by another practice team member.

Wouldn't it be great if the dentist could delegate these tasks and just get on with practising dentistry? So why aren't they?

The answer to this question is multifaceted:

## Letting go

Firstly the dentist has to be willing to let go of these tasks. Many dentists are sticklers for detail and like to do things themselves to make sure that they are done right. When confronted with this behaviour they may acknowledge a slightly excessive need for control but also come out with some justifications. They will tell you that they don't mind or actually enjoy ordering supplies (for example). Dentists like these have to ask themselves two questions:

1. What is best for the business? Setting a practice up like this means that its growth will be limited by how thin the dentist's time can be spread.
2. What is best for them as dentists and practice owners? Each additional task a dentist takes on that could be delegated represents an incremental dilution of their time, headspace and focus on dentistry.

The dentist's role in the practice if he's a practice owner also includes being a good manager and leader. This role involve making sure that the most appropriate team members are doing each of the jobs of the practice and that the breadwinners of the practice (dentists and hygienists) are focussed on seeing patients to the best of their ability.

Once the dentists of the practice are ready to let go, the next step is to determine all the tasks that they may be doing that they shouldn't be. Anything not involved in the practice of dentistry like marketing, IT support, handpiece maintenance coordinating, ordering supplies, staff meeting organising, newsletter publishing, bookkeeping, numbers tracking, etc, etc.

A job description should be prepared that accurately reflects the tasks that need to be delegated. Once you have that written, show it to a few team members and gauge their reaction. You may be pleasantly surprised to find some team members willing to take some tasks on board as part of their job. If this is the case, those tasks can be transferred to their job description and performance review template, so the extra tasks they've completed throughout the year are documented and remembered by the time you review their annual performance.

## Recruiting

If your team are fully occupied and there is no capacity for extra duties, you may need to recruit another person to take the tasks on. Many dentists would baulk at the prospect of paying for an extra staff member to do tasks that are currently being done by themselves. However focussing on the cost of the staff member alone misses the point of hiring this

person. The extra person should enable them and the practice to generate more income and grow.

Looking at the list of duties you have compiled, you need to define what qualities you are looking for. For example, if you have listed “Assist with creation and design of marketing material for the practice” as a duty, you need to define what qualities a person who does this would have. For example: do you want someone who can liaise with the local community paper, someone who actually writes the material and designs the layout, someone with creative flair or excellent written communication skills? Define the qualities required for each duty you have listed. Once you have a list of qualities for all the duties required circle the 4 most important ones.

Now you have these 4 qualities, these should be focussed on throughout all the recruitment activities. When writing the job ad, include those 4 qualities, when reading through candidate applications, focus on those 4 qualities, when preparing interview questions, frame the questions around those 4 qualities, when conducting reference checks, ask the referee questions around these 4 qualities. The message here is that one should be consistent throughout the whole recruitment process.

Once you have new team members, new job descriptions and the delegation of tasks done, the final part of the process of delegation is maintenance. Delegation is not the same thing as abdication. Delegation takes management. You cannot just set the roles in your practice and assume that everything is understood and handled correctly. It takes regular oversight and meetings with all team members to ensure that there isn't any confusion about what is expected and that the deliverables are what was expected.

Creating the roles and job descriptions for team members ensures that each team member is working to their strengths and the practice is able to grow to its full potential. The more tasks that the owner/dentists hold on to, the more limited the practice becomes.

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