

Managing Staff – October 2008

As clinicians you didn't go to medical school to be business managers and yet the business manager's skills are exactly what you need to have in this ever more businesslike marketplace.

Whatever your administrative set-up, even if you are just sharing a secretary attached to the local private hospital, you need to understand that you play an integral part in the managing of your practice. You do after all have a major stake in the quality outcomes your practice achieves! A direct correlation obviously exists between a failure to provide a high quality patient and clinical service with a failure to thrive financially. A quick search on Google for advice on managing people in an office will throw back an enormous and bewildering amount of reference material. Here's some help: Simply put, PHF advocates asking yourself the following questions. Once you can answer them all favourably you are well on your way to ensuring a happy, high quality and ultimately successful practice regardless of its size and scope:

Have you recruited the right people? See our article on this in this series.

What is the practice vision, its goals and purpose? Be clear and forthcoming with your staff in explaining your vision and goals for your practice. Remember that practice management is a tough job and the people who work in this area need to fully understand the mission if they are to work hard for you.

How far do you want to empower your staff? Be clear which decisions are yours alone, which ones require staff input and which ones are theirs to make. Ensure you clearly lay out the decision-making process and how far you expect to be involved in it. Remember if you do empower staff that you have given them the necessary information and training to carry out your orders and that the extent of their decision-making powers is in line with their responsibility and ability.

Does your staff know what they are supposed to be doing? Every staff member should have a full job description, outlining not only their day to day duties but also the expected level of performance and the reporting lines both horizontal and vertical. Remember to update the job description as the job evolves and responsibility grows or diminishes.

Are written policies and procedures available to staff? Key processes and procedures for all the most important functions of practice management should always be written down, constantly updated and freely available to staff. This may seem an onerous amount of work and it is in the beginning. But once it is done and staff is using them you will gain by being able to stand back a little more from your practice administration and maybe see more patients!

Are you supporting your staff? Remember your practice management staff are professionals. Remember also that they are playing a hugely influential and direct part in the make or break of your practice. You must support them properly by ensuring they have the appropriate resources to do their jobs; that they have good IT equipment and access to ample reference material. Support them also by listening to their concerns, showing interest in what they have to say and not giving the impression you have far more important things to do. Try to arrange regular dialogue with staff outside clinic and theatre hours to avoid being late or interrupted.

Are you encouraging improvement? Customer service is of paramount importance both clinically and administratively. Your staff need to work in an environment which encourages and rewards excellence. Look for ways for your staff to better themselves (courses, qualifications, attending conferences, involving them more) and always praise and reward appropriately when they go that extra mile for you or a patient.

Are you fostering teamwork? Your practice staff (should) know more about managing a practice than you do! Involve them, ask them for ways the practice can improve its service or grow. Give them enough of your time to show them that you respect and value them. Try and take decisions together and encourage them to take responsibility for outcomes. This way they will feel part of your practice and consequently more motivated to help you improve it.

Remember your secretary, practice manager or practice management team are the face of your practice. It is therefore worth your while spending time to ensure you are managing them in the right way. Empower them, equip them and motivate them to get on with the jobs that you have not spent years studying to do. You are after all clinicians and not business managers!