Developing your team's potential

Is training for non-clinical dental staff a worthwhile practice investment?

Martha Walker* says yes.

Training and educating the practice team

Clinicians are used to timetabling professional development into their calendar, continuing their education and improving clinical skills. However, how is the professional development of the practice manager, the administration and reception staff scheduled into the practice's timetable?

As more regulation and legislation governs the way dental practices operate, the practice manager is expected to be educated and knowledgeable in a variety of subjects and capable of turning that knowledge into procedures the staff can follow in the workplace to demonstrate compliance and at the same time maintain a clear focus on delivering excellent patient/customer care.

Administration and reception staff are at the practice frontline and the interface between the dentist and the patient. As such they need to be competent, experienced and professional in handling the patients. These skills should be constantly developed and updated to allow staff to be partners in delivering the best possible patient care.

Persuading your employer to agree to staff development

Training for administrative staff still doesn't come as the norm for many practices. Often

**Martha Walker is a member of the steering group for the London based Practice Managers Forum (PMF), originally set up to support and educate practice managers in the independent healthcare sector. The PMF welcomes managers from the dental sector as well to its educational meetings. If you would like to know more about the quarterly seminars (which are free and on a first come first served basis) visit the PMF website: www.practicemanagersforum.com.*

Training

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employers take the attitude 'everything is working well, there aren't any complaints, where's the need to change?'

As a practice manager how do you go about persuading your employer that training for the non-clinical staff really is a worthwhile practice investment?

Do your homework

What do you want to achieve, firstly for your administrative team and secondly for yourself?

When you are negotiating for training justify how the course, presentation or workshop will benefit the practice as a whole. Group training is a good opportunity for team building: no-one is being singled out and staff have the chance to share ideas and solutions.

Highlight areas that need attention, for instance you may have carried out a patient survey that scored low on making appointments with ease. Use this as an example where a group training session on using the booking system would be beneficial.

For yourself as practice manager explain how you need to keep up-to-date with the latest in regulation and legislation. If possible have an

example to demonstrate your case; maybe you had a recent staff disciplinary incident where you felt you could have handled it with more confidence had you understood the due process better.

When proposing your own professional development don't give the impression you will be spending more time on courses than actually managing the practice. Whereas most of the staff training happens within the practice, your education and training will generally take place elsewhere and usually in the company of other managers. Show that you have considered the implications of being away, such as who will deputise in your absence. Also let your employer know you are committed to improving your skills by attending some lectures or presentations outside work hours*.

Have a spending budget in mind

Put forward your proposal of how you see training for staff and yourself taking place. Have a budget in mind that you feel is reasonable for the practice to spend on education and training.

As manager you will be able to deliver some of the training yourself. Identify those in the

practice who have a special responsibility or are particularly good at something and ask them to help deliver training. Ask other practices what they do for training; could you share the expense of an external trainer or a speaker? Find out if a drug company could help sponsor a training session.

Make the training programme a positive step

By preparing and presenting an organised and appropriate training programme for the administration and reception staff and yourself as manager, the administration side of the practice is complementing the clinical and clinical support staff's professional development so the practice as a whole is delivering good clinical care in a professional environment.

If you feel that your employer is still hesitant about the idea to invest in staff development explain that as part of the Care Quality Commission (CQC) requirements for compliance the practice must be able to demonstrate that all staff are properly trained to carry out their roles within the practice in a competent and efficient manner.

Creating and planning a training programme for the administration team

Once you have agreed with your employer to develop a staff training and education schedule, you will need to create a 12-month plan.

Clinicians and technicians will book time-out to attend educational and training events and as they tend to go on courses individually it doesn't have a huge impact on the practice. However, most administration staff training will be a group exercise and will take place in the practice. Therefore you will need to look at the practicalities of accommodating the session: will there be patients in the practice during this time, how long will it last and how often will the training sessions be held. You will probably find once a month is adequate for group training and may decide on a one or two hour session depending on the topic, with individual staff development plans being treated on a case by case basis.

Many of the group training subjects will be centred on regulation compliance and supporting the clinical care your patients receive. Draw up a list of topics that need to be covered by the practice. Involve the staff by asking them for topic ideas. When you have a list of proposed subjects then decide who will present them. Will the practice have to acquire the services from an external expert or is there someone in-house who can deliver the subject? For instance you may decide that basic life support training must be brought in,

'Group training is an excellent way to deliver topics.'

but infection control can be presented by the lead dental nurse. It may be worth considering buddying with another practice, if they have an in-house expert in health and safety and you have one in infection control then swap your experts to deliver the training to your respective practices. Secure your external presenters first; if they are good they will be booked up quickly. When you have diarised all the subjects and confirmed the dates distribute the training programme to everyone in the practice.

Group training is an excellent way to deliver topics, such as basic life support, confidentiality, chaperoning, message taking, infection control, child protection and health and safety. But to develop your staff's potential or to improve poor performance, the practice will need to invest in personalised training for specific members of the team. Often personalised training plans come as a result of an appraisal, so ensure that you have a section in your appraisal process to discuss future development and training of the individual.

Continuing practice manager's professional development

As part of the administrative team you will undertake the group training such as basic life support and infection control, however, as practice manager you will need to be up to date on everything from employment law changes, to health and safety legislation and COSHH regulations to the latest DOH guidelines.

If you haven't previously created a professional development programme for yourself then start by asking what you would like to know more about and what you want to achieve in the coming 12 months. Perhaps you have knowledge gaps on specific topics and need 'one off' presentations to fill the gaps or provide updates. Maybe you want to do a day release course over a year that will provide you with formal certification of your achievement. Whatever it is make sure that it is manageable alongside your work.

Talk to other local practice managers and find out what they do about their development.

Is there a local managers meeting group you could attend? If there isn't then why not start a monthly lunchtime meeting where a group of managers meet and discuss issues that are a concern or share how a problem has been tackled. Take it in turns to hold it in each other's practices. Networking and peer support is a vital part of successful personal development.

Much of a practice manager's knowledge and skills are transferable. Therefore take advantage of courses available from law firms that offer free workshops and seminars in employment law and health and safety to small and medium size businesses.

Source more formal courses and workshops through dental magazines such as *Vital*, online and through the PCT; also take advantage of the CQC seminars that happen periodically around the country.

Recording and reflecting on training

Provide each member of staff with a training folder complete with reflection sheets. Reflection sheets allow staff to record their own learning notes in a structured way. Not only do reflection sheets act as an *aide memoire* they also provide documented evidence to demonstrate amongst others, CQC compliance. Many practices produce certificates for in-house training to join the ones received from outside trainers. Create a spreadsheet with all the staff training courses, events and workshops recorded and indicate who attended what, where and when for a complete practice record of all training.

Include training achievements in staff meetings so everyone has an opportunity to know what is happening in the practice.

In conclusion

Updating the skills and broadening the knowledge base of the practice manager and the administration staff completes the practice's professional development picture. The whole practice can offer the best in professional care and support to all its patients. The staff, the practice and the patients all benefit.

Top tips

- Decide what topics need covering
- What are the benefits?
- How will it be delivered?
- What are the likely costs?
- Create a 12-month programme
- Involve the staff in choosing topics
- Buddy with another practice
- Network with other practice managers
- Record what you have learnt
- Celebrate the achievements.