

A Failure to Communicate - Does This Ever Happen in Your Office?

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During the COVID Pandemic in 2020, our office decided that the clinical staff would get new lab coats, cover our heads, wear face shields and wear N-95 masks. Our office manager asked if we could send her a photo of us smiling. A couple of weeks went by, and I arrived at work, noticed everyone had new lab coats, coverings for their hair, face shields, N-95 mask, and cute little name tags with a photo of them smiling. I went to the lab coats, and mine was not there. I asked the clinical expeditor would she happen to know where my cute name tag is? Her reply, "no, ask the office manager." I asked the office manager if she had a name tag for me, and she said no. I asked her the question, do you know where I can have one made? She stated that she made them. I asked if she could make me one, and she said sure. Meanwhile, I used another employee's lab coat with their name on it, bought my head covering, and they provided a face shield for me. A couple of weeks went by, still no lab coat and no name tag. At this point, I did not feel like I was part of the team, and job security was a concern. What is going on?

Frequently dental offices have a failure to communicate from management to staff, staff to staff, doctor to the team, staff to doctor, and this can eventually lead to ineffective communication to the patient. As a consultant, I have seen this in several offices throughout my thirty-plus years in dentistry. So, what is the solution?

Develop a reliable communication program in your office. It should include a new employee training program, clear job descriptions, inner-office memos, and lab slips for lab cases done within the office. These tools will eliminate any confusion, hurt feelings, tension and keep the office flowing harmoniously.

First, beginning with the new employee. Some dental offices hire new employees when they are desperate to fill a position, and the new person is not always adequately trained. Failure to communicate the office's needs leads to frustrated employees with bad attitudes, blaming the new guy on the block. When a new member of the team joins the practice, a prepared Training Check-off list should be in place. If you would like to create a Training check-off list, create it in Excel. For instance, list the columns by procedure: Column A-Procedures Under this title, place subheadings like Sterilization, Chairside, Operatories, Supplies, Setups, Charting, and Lab. Under each subheading, a list of details describing the process. This communication will help eliminate any misunderstandings and help keep both parties accountable in the training process. Remember, documentation is a form of communication.

Second, job descriptions are not always clearly listed for each employee. Lack of written communication can cause a lack of consistent patient care, staff arguments, and blaming one another. I will use the back office as an example. In the back office, there are three main jobs (aside from chairside assisting): sterilization, ordering, and lab. Here is an example of the job descriptions: Job 1 sterilization- includes maintaining sterilizers by cleaning them once a week, sending the biological monitoring, keeping the clean area stocked to set up trays once cleaned. Job 2-Ordering supplies require an assistant to go through all the inventory every two weeks and create a list to replace the items needed. The person in charge should try to keep the supply cost should be 5% or lower under production. Job 3-Lab, this job description requires the assistant to track all lab cases to be delivered. Delivered lab cases for the day are documented on the schedule by the patients' names. The lab cases are filed alphabetically in the lab. All lab slips should go through your dental software program to easily track lab cases, eliminating paper. The in-house lab cases, like bleaching appliances, retainers should be completed by the staff member who took the impression.

For this reason, the employee in charge of the lab should track all in-house completed cases. The communication can be a written memo between both staff members. This article offers a brief description of all three jobs.

Furthermore, this does not imply there is no cross-over with daily duties in each area. On the contrary, everyone should work as a member of a team. This section is a tool to help the communication progress.

Therefore, this leads to the last point; inner office memos are a great tool. We have the technology, and that makes it so much easier. You can use an office email or text, everyone getting the information needed for the communication. More times than not, all staff members have not received the same communication whether they are full-time or part-time. Leaving employees out of the communication process does not build office morale.

In closing, this article began with a story, allow me to finish it. The office manager never made my cute little name tag with my photo of me smiling. Furthermore, no one ordered my labcoats. In a text message, I asked the assistants who were in charge if there was a problem? None of them replied. The office manager told me later that I could use the doctors' lab coat. Was this intentional, or was it a lack of communication? You decide.