



Creating a culture of continuous improvement will deliver enormous benefits to your practice

By Julie Parker

Creating a powerful culture within your team of continual improvement has numerous benefits for your dental practice. These include:

- Improved customer service;
- Better patient management;
- Higher treatment acceptance rates;
- Reduced staff turnover;
- Reduced operating costs;
- Improved team member performance; and
- Increased happiness and loyalty. And the list goes on.

The drawbacks are the time and energy it takes to establish and foster new ways of behaving. However, given the overwhelming benefits your practice would experience, any drawbacks should become easily manageable.

Do you want to create this powerful change and enjoy the benefits in your practice? Then, follow my process.

First of all, understanding what drives your team is important. Daniel Pink, in his best-selling book, *Drive*, described the three main drivers that motivate us:

- **PURPOSE:** The belief that we are working toward something larger and more important than themselves;
- **AUTONOMY:** The need to direct your own life and work. To be fully motivated, you must be able to control what you do, when you do it, and who you do it with; and
- **MASTERY** The desire to improve.

I would like to add BELONGING to this list of drivers. Feeling as though you belong in a team helps you feel confident in bringing your skills and strengths forward.

Creating a working environment that fosters these drivers of autonomy, mastery, purpose and belonging is an empowering process for you, your current team and any incoming team members in the future.

The culture you want to create is one that has a clear purpose and provides team members with an inclusive, truly supportive environment to work where they have minimal direction over their day-to-day responsibilities and receive well-delivered feedback about their performance that inspires growth.

The JPPS Team Culture Principles

1. PURPOSE

You may already have a purpose identified in your practice. You may yet to have agreed on a compelling purpose that inspires your team. Your purpose needs to be something that makes team members feel excited and appeals to their personal and shared set of values. A useful purpose that I encourage teams to consider is inspired by the insightful Sandy Roth, an American dental consultant who is a master of patient psychology, communication and relationships. She says: “We help patients function better, feel better, look better and have greater peace-of-mind.”

2. AUTONOMY

The practice of effective delegation and communication and appropriate follow-up provides team members with the freedom to be self-directed in their responsibilities and attainment of dental practice goals.

If you are clear about the outcomes of any given task, team members can develop their own style while still achieving practice goals.

You must also be clear about the specific authority you give to each team member.

Following up with team members and providing useful feedback without micro-managing them will provide them with the information they need to adjust and modify their behaviours and processes.

3. MASTERY

Fostering an environment of mastery requires team members (including managers and owners) to embrace the following concepts:

- **CANI** - Constant And Never-ending Improvement - is the path to mastery. Improvement indicates there are areas to improve. The identification of these areas is called feedback. Feedback, although initially uncomfortable, when delivered well, consistently and including the entire team, diminishes discomfort and improvement is substantial and swift. Encourage all team members to become comfortable with the discomfort experienced when on the path of CANI. Support them and cheer them on as they progress.
- **MISTAKES** - Mistakes are wonderful as they are a necessary part of growth. Embrace honest mistakes as a path to learning (Mistakes borne of dishonesty or bad attitude are not tolerated).
- **PRACTICE & REPETITION** - Practice and repetition are how skills are honed and new behaviours adopted. Allow all team members the time and patience to improve their performance.

“The impact of a culture of continuous improvement may alienate some team members. Listen to their concerns and provide support. If team members who are resistant to change wish to move on, do not stop them. This kind of environment does not suit everyone. If you insist they stay and be unhappy or disruptive, your new culture will be severely compromised...”

- **BELONGING** - Whereas many practices require conformity to a narrow range of behaviours to “fit in”, understand and appreciate the differences of all team members. Embrace the variety of strengths and styles that your team members bring to the practice and exploit the opportunities it brings.

The culture of continuous improvement can see team members SEEKING OUT feedback. Can you imagine that? A team member going to another and asking “*How do you think I could improve in this area?*” Consider what is required for that team member to desire such interaction. A strong desire to improve, a willingness to be uncomfortable and vulnerable and trust in their own psychological safety.

Maintaining your culture of continuous improvement is crucial for your team to trust the process and behave accordingly. It won’t all be smooth sailing. The owners and managers of the practice are also adopting new behaviours. There will be mistakes. But mistakes are a part of learning and are an important and crucial part of the journey. When there’s a slip-up, take responsibility, modify behaviour and keep progressing. Avoidance of mistakes is a flawed plan. It is our response to mistakes where improvement lies.

The impact of a culture of continuous improvement may alienate some team members. Listen to their concerns and provide support. If team members who are resistant to change wish to move on, do not stop them. This kind of environment does not suit everyone. If you insist they stay and be unhappy or disruptive, your new culture will be severely compromised.

When employing new team members, ensure you describe your culture carefully in the job ad. Weed out applicants who are not interested in the kind of personal growth your practice fosters and instead appeal to those who are excited by the opportunity.

If you’re serious about the culture of your practice, take my online course on this very subject. I would also suggest that participating as a team is your best step forward. Find the course at <https://jpps-online-courses.thinkific.com>

About the author

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