



Enough is enough!

By Julie Parker

Have you ever been in a situation that has become so progressively worse that you lose hope that it will ever improve?

Upon reflection, you can see how it got out of control. There were numerous times that you could have changed course. You hadn't realised that it would get this bad so you didn't take action.

There are dental practice owners who experience this with their teams. Slowly, via one minor incident at a time, their team members exhibit less consideration for one another, bad attitudes in some become the norm and it is no longer an enjoyable space in which to be.

If this scenario describes your team culture, I have good news! Now is the perfect time to say "enough is enough!"

Never are we more motivated for change than when we are completely fed up with a current situation. We are exhausted from having to deal with the situation and it has become too painful to continue.

Normally, we resist change. Our default is to do the usual as it takes less energy and thought. We also resist change because there is "unknown" in change and how can we be sure we want the alternative? However, when we can no longer accept the way things are, we seek change. We become willing to accept potential drawbacks that change may bring because we realise changing is our only option.

If your formerly pleasing team culture has slowly morphed into a toxic minefield, it is likely that other team members are thinking "enough is enough!" and, like you, are desperate for change.

Paving the way to change

A guru of mine has been Sandy Roth. Sandy is from the USA and toured Australia many times, teaching dental teams to become better communicators with patients and with each other.

Sandy has a series of five questions that can be helpful for dysfunctional teams to navigate their way to an improved team dynamic:

1. Where have we been?
2. Where are we now?
3. Where are we going?
4. How are we going to get there?
5. What role will each one of us play in getting there?

Gathering everyone together for a team brainstorming session and asking these questions is a great first step. Sending this list of questions prior to your gathering will help team members contemplate and prepare and come with open, rather than defensive, mindsets.

1. Where have we been?

It can be helpful to discuss the foundations and behaviours that have built the team into what it is today. Identifying the dynamics that culminated into the team that exists today helps explain particular attitudes, habits and behaviours. Even in our personal lives, once we identify why we do the things we do, we understand ourselves better. We can then start making better decisions.

2. Where are we now?

Here you encourage team members to describe where the team is now working well and where it is not working well. What methods of communication, attitudes, behaviours and systems do you want to keep? What needs to be improved? What needs to be eradicated?

3. Where are we going?

Build a picture of what a great team looks like. Gain everyone's input. Ask questions, such as:

- What are the characteristics of a great team member?
- What behaviours are to be avoided?
- How will we deliver/receive feedback?

- How will we manage mistakes?
- How will we reward great performance?
- How will we manage unhelpful team member behaviour?
- How will we manage team conflict?
- How will we celebrate our wins?
- How will we foster our new and powerful Team Culture?
- How will we ensure there is an environment for open and frank communication?
- How will we encourage and get the best out of each other?

4. How are we going to get there?

Design a plan for achieving your goal of a functional and happy team. Start with the end in mind and reverse engineer your journey. A simple starting point is to design better meetings with better agendas. You could even bring in an external chairman of the meeting, as many professional practices do, including legal, accounting and dental.

5. What role will each one of us play in getting there?

This is my favourite question as it delivers the clarity required to take action and establishes personal responsibility. It takes the shared, and therefore diluted, responsibility away from the team as a group down to each team member accountable for their personal behaviours.

Once you have identified your clear team goal and designed your plan forward, keep the level of importance and urgency high by fostering your new team culture. This is done in three ways.

Talk It Up

Keep it as part of an ongoing discussion. Intend to speak about it daily. It may seem like a lot of effort, however, it doesn't take long in reality and the impact is substantial.

Live It

If the owners are not willing to acknowledge, promote and live all practice principles then they cannot expect employees to do so. It must start with setting the example from the top.

Acknowledge others' engagement

It is pure gold when others follow your lead and start "talking up" and "living" the company vision and culture. Acknowledge these efforts one-on-one and also publicly. This way you are clearly communicating with the whole team "this is what success looks like".

I have consulted at practices where the poor team dynamic has been in place for so long that it is unreasonable to expect confidence in future improvements. If this is the case with your team, then it is time for the owner or manager to drive the change by themselves.

Gather the team together and let everyone know that the topic is very important and attendance is crucial. If some team

members have legitimate reasons for not attending, I suggest you record the meeting for them to view later.

Resist the tendency to soften the message and its importance. Your team will gauge from your demeanour how serious you actually are.

Start by listing down specific scenarios that are destructive to an enjoyable working environment. You do not need to mention names. The key here is to very clearly communicate the unhelpful or destructive behaviours.

Then, state with conviction, **"ENOUGH IS ENOUGH; this stops today"**.

Depending upon whether team members show relief or become combative in response to your declaration, you either move through the next step on your own or with input and discussion from everyone.

The next step is to identify what a great, productive and happy team looks like. Move through the questions listed above - "Where are we going?", "How are we going to get there?" and "What role will each one of us play in getting there?"

Shifting the culture of a team requires strong, effective and consistent leadership.

This is not the time to be motivated by a need to be liked. It is a time to be firm and provide clear direction in a fair, supportive environment.

Conduct frequent conversations with team members one-on-one to coach them through the process. They will make mistakes along the way. That is a part of learning. Provide more positive alternative responses to situations if they slip up and reward the behaviours you want to be repeated.

No other team member has the authority to make such a fundamental shift in the daily operations of your dental practice than the owner and sometimes the manager. Use this power to empower your team - and practice - to build great success.

About the author

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