



Drilling down to the root cause: How to identify and solve the real problems in your dental practice

By Julie Parker

As a dental practice management consultant, I often come across practice owners who are constantly battling symptoms rather than addressing the root cause of their problems.

If you've ever found yourself trying to fix issues such as a gappy schedule or high staff turnover, it's essential to pause and reflect: could these problems merely be symptoms of a more profound issue?

Think about how you operate as a clinician. When a patient comes to you with an abscess, you do not limit your thoughts to simply treating the infection. Instead, you consider what caused the infection in the first place. Is there decay present? A periodontal issue? As a skilled practitioner, you know that providing antibiotics is not enough. You know you have to find the CAUSE of the infection and treat that. Otherwise, the infection will return.

A similar approach is useful when addressing the problems that occur in the operation of your dental practice.

And there are always problems!

For example, let's look at the common problem of a gappy appointment book. Many practice owners will say to me that they need to solve this "problem" by getting more patients booked in. However, without identifying the root cause of the growing downtime in the appointment book, we're addressing the symptom only and not the cause.

Root Cause Tool

SYMPTOM (Problem)

Enter the challenge your practice is currently experiencing

CAUSE

List 3 aspects of your dental practice that influence, or cause, the SYMPTOM

| | | |
|----------|----------|----------|
| CAUSE #1 | CAUSE #2 | CAUSE #3 |
|----------|----------|----------|

SOLUTION/S

For each CAUSE, provide 1-3 actions that you could take that will help resolve the root problem

| | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| ACTIONS FOR CAUSE #1 | ACTIONS FOR CAUSE #2 | ACTIONS FOR CAUSE #3 |
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A gappy appointment book can have several causes, such as:

- Decreasing treatment plan conversion rate;
- Fall in the quality of your customer service;
- Inadequate management of the recall strategy;
- Lack of follow-up with patients who have incomplete treatment, or;
- Increase in patient cancellations.

Managing the problem simply by getting more new patients in the book might address the short-term problem of the gappy schedule (like antibiotics for the abscess), however, the practice will still suffer long term as those new patients don't return because the root cause of patients failing to return has not been resolved.

To help dental practices tackle the inevitable problems with their day-to-day operations, I have developed a helpful resource called the Root Cause Tool (See figure opposite).

This tool takes you through the following steps...

1. Identify the symptom.
2. List three issues that may be causing the symptom.
3. Consider strategies (or treatments) that can help fix the true causes of the symptoms identified.

When faced with a symptom, consider three causes that would likely be influencing the outcome.

For example, if your appointment book is looking sparse, you might consider your treatment plan conversion rate; recall strategy; and management of incomplete treatment. Then, for each of these causes, identify what actions you could take to get a different outcome.

So, if a cause is a reducing treatment plan acceptance rate, actions you could take could be:

- Conduct a team training session where you brainstorm and role-play ideas on how to improve;
- Find an online course that could deliver new insights that your team have not yet considered (such as a Julie Parker Practice Success/Dental Business Mastery mini-course like *Achieving Patient Engagement*); and/or
- Analyse your practice reports and have the provider who achieves the highest conversion rate mentor the rest of the team.

Just like any business, dental practices encounter ups and downs in performance. Uncovering the underlying factors that are causing your dental practice to

underperform at this moment is essential for identifying and implementing the most sustainable and effective strategies for long-term success.

If you would like to access the *Root Cause Tool*, head over to our website dentalbusinessmastery.com.au and go to the Free Resources page. Download the fillable form and use over and over again to help you manage your dental practice towards greater success.

About the author

Julie Parker is a Dental Practice Management Consultant and Team Educator. At the age of 33, Julie became the first non-dentist to own a dental practice in Australia. Julie is Co-Founder of Julie Parker Practice Success and Co-Founder of Dental Business Mastery. Visit julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au and dentalbusinessmastery.com.au to find how Julie can help your dental practice be more successful. You will find information about consulting programs, online courses, podcasts, free downloads and more.