



Optimizing Performance

Providing staff with both initial and ongoing training opportunities is key to practice success.

ASSEMBLING A COHESIVE, skilled staff is one of the greatest challenges of practice ownership. In order to thrive, a facility needs a dedicated team of employees who can work cooperatively to provide the best patient care. While hiring right is a powerful first step, no staff member can maintain—or improve—their skills and motivation without initial and ongoing training that reflects the unique culture of a practice. “The key to successful training is to be clear, concise and consistent, starting from day one,” says Mara Shorr, vice president of marketing and business development at Florida-based The Best Medical Business Solutions. “The practices with the strongest teams start training from the employee’s first day in the office, rather than waiting to catch them doing something wrong, and continue to provide training opportunities throughout that person’s employment.”

By Shelley Moench-Kelly, MBA

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TRAINING BASICS

As a practice owner or manager, it is your responsibility to ensure that all staff members are thoroughly trained to care for patients as you would, if you could do all their jobs as well as your own. Any weakness in the practice armor can result in a downturn in the quality of care, loss of revenue and harm to your reputation. But the process of staff training doesn't have to be overwhelming.

Start with these key components to create a successful staff training protocol:

- A clear vision of your practice goals
- One person delegated to oversee training
- Regular staff meetings that include training components
- A commitment to sending staff off-site to educational conferences
- Senior employees who mentor and train new staff
- Evaluations to test staff on what they've learned

"If your vision is to take care of patients in a professional and kind way, then you have to make sure that all of your training opportunities filter through that mission statement," says Steve Shama, MD, a retired physician who now works with Joy Works Communications.

Elizabeth Holloway, senior consultant for Nevada's BSM Consulting, recommends creating a training schedule and choosing one staff member to be your "training champion." "This person is tasked with taking up the cause of employee training and keeping things prepared and moving forward," she says. "I find that without someone dedicated to organizing staff training and development, it just doesn't happen."

New employees should receive an employee handbook outlining the policies of your practice as well as a detailed job description. Additionally, new staff members should shadow more senior staff over the course of their first few weeks to learn the protocols of their new positions.

Ronald Moy, MD, of Moy Fincher Chipps Facial Plastics & Dermatology in Beverly Hills, California, has his practice's senior staff members mentor and train new hires and administer proficiency exams to make sure the training was effective and understood before the new employee works independently.

New employees should also become familiar with the entire practice team and each person's role. "Make sure to review your practice's complete list of services and FAQs with your new staff members so they aren't left stumbling for answers," says Shorr.

Lou Haggerty, senior vice president of Patients Unlimited Marketing Consultants (PUMC) notes that training new employees on the practice's unique culture and full range of services is particularly important for front desk staff, who are often the youngest and the lowest paid people on staff. "Obviously a receptionist is never going to perform a treatment, but if she is at least aware of the things that others in the organization are doing—and how she supports that—she's better equipped to do her job," she says.

Shadowing is an effective training tool, especially for new employees and those who have been promoted to positions with more or different responsibilities. The length of time that is needed may vary based on the employee and the position. "We don't turn the receptionist loose until she's been shadowing for about six months, because every phone call could be a \$15,000 phone call, and we won't take a chance with that," says S. Randolph Waldman, MD, founder of Waldman Schantz Plastic Surgery Center and Skin Care in Lexington, Kentucky.

Having seasoned employees train and mentor newbies offers additional benefits: Senior staff members will likely bask in the prestige of mentorship, and it can help them feel more motivated and proud about their own positions and roles in the practice.



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EDUCATION FOR SEASONED EMPLOYEES

Once employees are hired and trained in their specific roles, they—and your practice—will benefit from ongoing training opportunities to keep skills and enthusiasm high, which is key to keeping your employees motivated. “When people start to lose their motivation, the staff loses its enthusiasm,” says Haggerty. There are several resources available that you can use to provide ongoing training.

Regular staff meetings with a training or educational component are an effective way to keep employees motivated. Shorr recommends that staff meetings take place weekly, monthly or—at the very least—quarterly. Whichever you choose, consistency is key to success.

These recurring meetings allow the practice owner to convey top-level information to employees about the overall health of the practice and any relevant news that affects them. Senior and newer staff members are able to meet on a level playing field and discuss office challenges, have Q&A sessions, and share any training information and news they’ve gathered since the last meeting. These meetings create a sense of community for staff, offering a chance for personal interaction among staff members who might not regularly communicate with each other.

Off-site courses and conferences offer attendees specific, intensive training as well as face-to-face interaction with their peers, which is unique to this method of training. If a practice cannot bear the cost of sending its

entire staff to a conference or event, one employee can attend and bring their notes back to present to other staff members during a special in-house training session or the facility’s regular staff meeting.

Dr. Waldman regularly sends employees to attend conferences and then has them share what they learned with non-attending staff. “We hold a PowerPoint program created by someone who attended the meeting where they go through their lecture notes and action items to help us build on what we already do each day,” he says.

“Nothing beats the opportunity for your employees to attend an industry conference in person,” says Shorr. “They’re able to hear dozens of industry professionals and experts speak on a variety of topics and, more importantly, they can ask questions of those experts afterwards.”

Industry consultants who visit your office to help improve some aspect of your operations are valuable trainers. “Consultants are very good because they come right into your office and recommend positive changes that directly affect your practice management,” says Dr. Waldman.

Dr. Moy frequently hires consultants to help train staff. “We use consultants especially when we are preparing for ambulatory surgical center accreditation,” he says, noting that the benefit of this form of training is that it is personalized to your specific practice versus other methods that might be more general in nature.

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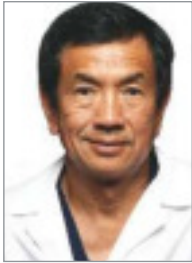




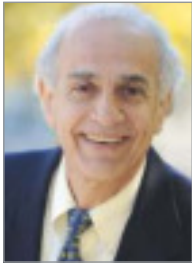
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Manufacturer-supplied training is a highly touted option because the staff can learn about new technologies or product lines from an expert, not just a set of written instructions. These trainers can also help launch new procedures or product lines, and encourage staff to reach new goals. Dr. Moy's practice often hosts vendor-supplied trainers for equipment and procedure training, as well as pharmaceutical representative training to help his staff understand how to educate patients about their medications.

"Vendors know that proper training typically leads to a boost in procedures and sales, so most are happy to help. In addition, they'll often bring trial samples or allow staff to try procedures, which is another great way to inspire your team," says Shorr.

Webinars offered by consultants, manufacturers and even other physicians are one of the most cost-effective training methods available. "They allow for specific topic-based training right at the practice location," says Shorr. "And they are typically free."

Dr. Moy's staff watches webinars and online videos to learn about "miscellaneous topics including billing, reimbursements, improving service and marketing ideas," he says.

Dr. Waldman also uses webinars for staff training, which he says are helpful as long as there is some follow-through discussion on what they are learning and how the ideas can be implemented in the practice.

While comprehensive training at the time of hire and continual education are key to creating a cohesive, highly skilled staff, practice owners and managers must also remember that hiring and ongoing supervision are important components of staff management as well. "If a staffer becomes a negative presence in the office, you cannot be afraid of change, even if you deem that person is valuable to you," says Dr. Waldman. "It is crucial to know when to cut your losses."

Dr. Shama has a unique perspective on hiring new staff. "One of my favorite quotes is that 'I hire for kindness,'" he says. "A prospective employee may have a perfect CV or resume, but if empathy is not present, it's a difficult trait to teach. If you find a kind person, your relationship as well as their relationships with patients will be nicer." **ME**

Shelley Moench-Kelly, MBA, is a Vermont-based freelance writer.