

# Eyes on the Prize

Providing Focused and Attentive Service

**W**e demonstrate how much we value people by how we communicate with them. Whether you are conscious of this or not, when you interact with another person, you are paying attention to the cues that demonstrate your value to them and you respond accordingly. Without focus and energy, we can easily create barriers between ourselves and our patients, family members, or even friends.

One of my clients once referred to his staff's interactions with patients as "processing." It is easy to fall into a "processing" habit in a dental environment. There are simply so many tasks required to effectively treat patients' clinical needs during the limited time allowed in a patient visit. It can feel like we don't have time to effectively listen.

When we take on this perspective, bad habits become part of our day-to-day functions. As a result of these bad habits, our patients intuitively find it hard to trust us or value the life-changing treatment recommendations that we provide. With potential life expectancies of 85 to 90 years, dentistry will impact retirement finances and quality of life in ways never considered before. We are now creating health and comfort options that were once not available to our parents.

Yet, we continue to allow undisciplined interactions throughout our practices. In our clinical procedures, we create "protocols," set "standards," and monitor and train. In our interactions, sometimes the best training that a team

is exposed to are "scripts," which staff members sometimes speak *at* patients. In reality, scripts are often words that are carefully designed and arranged by someone who is more skilled to deliver them than your team member. Yet those words are intended to flow out of *their* mouths, with the correct tone and placement in the conversation. However, without training in the underlying concepts of effective listening and questioning techniques, these words can become uncomfortable for your team member to deliver and feel manipulative to your patient. There's a reason: Predesigned, planned responses are thoughtless, undisciplined, and may minimize both you and your team. How would you feel if a health professional who you were speaking with wasn't really listening to your needs or concerns but instead was only thinking about what to say next?

## The four types of conversations

We all need to discipline ourselves to focus during our interactions with patients and others. We must listen well and use feedback to clarify what we heard, and then share our observations. There are four types of conversations that you may have during any given day:

1. Business
2. Social
3. Me-driven
4. Them-driven

Many of our interactions during the course of a typical work day are comprised of all four of these aspects. The key to building long-term relationships and success comes from having more of the "business" and "them-driven" content in our discussions. Some of you may disagree with me. You may believe that the way to really connect with your patients is to share your personal information with them and to have them do the same with you. There may be some cases in which this has some truth. However, I think many of our patients understand that they are coming to us for a professional service. They want you to listen to them.

Have you ever had to listen politely, look interested, and hear all about the personal life of a receptionist, a hair dresser, waiter, nurse, or medical assistant when you were tired and just didn't have any more energy to engage? Did

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you ask him or her to stop yakking or did you just politely listen and make neutral comments, only to have him or her continue chatting about his or her son's soccer game, the weather, or their vacation? Sometimes in social and business conversations, we find ourselves engaged in these me-driven conversations. Your patients don't enjoy them any more than you do. Do you think your patient rushed out of a stressful day at work, thinking, "I can't wait to go to my dentist's office to hear all about Rita the receptionist's last vacation and the dentist's problems with his new car!"? I doubt it.

#### A better way to serve

So, if constantly talking about your personal issues isn't the best way to connect with a patient and build loyalty, what is? Try offering focus and attentive service. These are the most effective ways to serve your patient. Focus and attentive service require discipline. These traits require you to let go of your own needs or personal life issues and make the visit completely centered on your patient.

For example, in a social conversation in which a patient is discussing his or her child's soccer tournament, don't jump in with information about your child's athletic abilities or scholarly accomplishments. Keep the conversation focused on your patient. If he or she asks about your child, give a brief response, such as, "Thank you for asking. Laura just won her last tournament. We are very proud of her. How are your sons doing?" As a general rule, don't offer more than three to five sentences that focus on

you. Bring the conversation back to your patient. Your patients feel connected to you because you listen and care about them, not because you are talking at them.

Don't tell a patient about what a hard day you're having! Your patients are paying for you to be at your best. As a patient myself, I believe that the owner of the business has the responsibility to maintain a high standard—a standard that's high enough to warrant my hard-earned money.

Whether you are an owner or employee, most customers won't tolerate a disregard for inadequate service for long. Disregard or laziness in service industries is not well-accepted in this economy. The sad part is that most people won't complain if they are unhappy. They usually just move on. If you are waiting for a significant amount of complaints before you improve a negative behavior in your practice, you may already be too late.

If you are the leader in your organization, set the example. Be disciplined in your interactions. Be present when you are engaged in discussions with your patient. Stop any thoughts or emotional reactions related to the staff or other patients. Focus only on the patient in front of you. Be kind and friendly. It's your tone of voice, body language, and your responses to their comments that tell your patients if you care. If you are a staff member, the same standard applies. ♦



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