

## Beyond Basic Training: In-House Programs That Build Top Performance

Effective training is good for you, your employees, patients and practice. Not only are well-trained employees more motivated and satisfied, but they devote valuable skills to increasing productivity and ensuring quality care. A knowledgeable team can free you up to do what you do best – provide excellent pediatric dentistry. This issue of *PMM News* focuses on how to create solid on-the-job training programs that will lead to top performance from your employees.

### Who Has Time for Training?

A common lament of pediatric dental practices is, "We don't have time for training; we're too busy working!" In other words, you know training is important, but you wonder if it is truly worth the time and effort to do it well. Quality training is not an expense; it is an investment. (And research shows it is quicker and more affordable to train an existing employee than to hire a new one.) Another way to look at the issue is to ask yourself how much productivity is lost by the actions of a poorly trained employee. Can your practice afford *not* to correct deficiencies in team performance?

### Can We Really Train Effectively In-house?

Management consultant Karen Moawad<sup>1</sup> notes, "The single most common method of training is on-the-job training, where the employee already doing the job trains the new employee during the course of the regular business day. This method has drawbacks as current employees may not be good teachers, are reluctant to criticize, or do not have time to prepare for training. The present staff often is so busy doing their jobs that the trainee is dragged along at a fast pace, totally

bewildered, and unable to put things into perspective properly."

Although in-house training may offer some disadvantages, it does offer some powerful advantages. Research shows the closer the training environment is to the actual job, the greater the skill acquisition and retention for the learner. In addition, one-on-one training is proven as the best method for teaching someone to perform specific tasks or procedures.

### What's the Training Objective?

An effective employee is not one who is trained the *most*, but one who is trained the *best*. Clear objectives form the cornerstone of a strong training program – and actually save time in the long run. A training objective is a statement describing precisely what a learner will know or be able to do as a result of the training. It includes the knowledge or skills, situations and resources, outcomes or results, and expected quality or quantity of these outcomes. Where do you find training objectives for your employee? They are found in the job description. (If you do not have strong job descriptions for your practice, an excellent source to guide you in development is Marsha Freeman's *Standard Operating Procedures for Pediatric Dentists*.)<sup>2</sup>

Review the job description and create a training objective for each position responsibility. Ask yourself three questions:

1. What skill or knowledge is required to perform the task? For example, to update patient records, the employee must know how to use the office software program and interpret the information on patient forms.
2. What is the situation or timeframe for the task? For example, appointment confirmations should be made by the end of the previous business day.

3. What standard of performance is expected? Must it be done exactly right every time – as with infection control procedures? Or must it be done fairly well most of the time – as with following up on appointment cancellations?

A sample training objective for a front desk position and dental assisting position is listed below.

**Action:** Send out new patient welcome packets.

**Situation/Timeframe:** Within 48 hours of scheduling the new patient appointment.

**Standard:** Letter is customized with the patient's name and hand signed. The welcome packet includes practice brochure, appointment card, business card and medical/dental history forms.

**Action:** Clean and maintain the chemiclave.

**Situation/Timeframe:** Once a week.

**Standard:** In keeping with the OSHA and universal precautions guidelines.

### What's the Training Plan?

Once you have created training objectives, you need a game plan that clearly shows when, where and how the training will take place. Consider the following points in your training plan.

**Order.** In what order should the training objectives be presented? Typically, you will build from the least to the most complex skills. For example, with a dental assisting position, you might first train in charting, sterilization, tray setups and maintenance of equipment. Training would progress to chair-side assisting in composite fillings, sealants, crowns and extractions.

**Topic.** What training objectives will be covered in each session?

**Location.** Where will the training sessions take place?

**Schedule.** How long will each session take? Will it be conducted during normal work hours? How can it be scheduled for minimal interruptions?

### Who's the Right Trainer?

Let us change the old saying, "Those who can't do, teach," to a more accurate one, "Those who can do, can't necessarily teach." Although your selected trainer must be skilled in the training topics, ability alone is not enough. Moawad notes, "It is important to choose your best communicator and not necessarily your best performer. Sometimes the most knowledgeable person on the staff is not a good teacher."<sup>1</sup>

Your trainer needs to be a confident person with good listening skills and the capacity to change communication approaches to fit different types of people. In addition, your trainer should be motivated by an interest in education and desire to help others learn.

### Tips for Trainers?

The following practical tips will help make training sessions a success.

**Project an upbeat image.** Your learner will pick up your attitudes – both positive and negative – along with your information. If you gripe about the practice, your learner will become critical of the practice as well.

**Prepare carefully.** Know which objectives you are going to cover in the training session. Gather the necessary information, equipment and materials.

**Explain well.** Select a training objective. Describe how the task is to be completed and why it is performed in a particular way. Remember to avoid dental terms the learner does not know yet.

**Demonstrate the task.** Take it step-by-step and do not rush it. An excellent demonstration at this point can save time later on. Explain again *what* you are doing and *why* you are doing it.

**Let the learner do the task while you coach.** Paraphrasing Aristotle, "What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing." You may need to go through it several times. Correct mistakes on the spot. For example, you might say, "Here is the error in the set-up of this tray. This is what you can do to avoid it in the future."

**If the learner has unusual problems.** Demonstrate the task again with the learner alternately watching and doing. Remember to remain patient and calm, because the learner probably may be flustered at this point.

**Encourage questions.** It is not easy for people to admit they do not understand something. Ask for questions often and listen carefully to what the learner says. A good trainer involves the learner and knows not to do all the talking.

**Provide support.** Give lots of encouragement along the way, and plenty of praise when the learner becomes proficient.

**Move on to a related task.** For example, if the trainee has made an appointment confirmation for a preventive appointment, move on to the confirmation of a restorative appointment. It is not necessary to demonstrate this skill, simply point out the differences and let the learner perform it.

**Review and preview.** Summarize the training session, sharing your perceptions of mistakes and successes. Then describe what will be covered in the next session.

### I Can Delegate Training Responsibility, Right?

While you can certainly assign the role of trainer to a team member, you are not completely off the hook. Here is your job description:

**Attitude.** Training is an important function, not an irritating imposition on practice productivity. Be sure to communicate to both the trainer and learner how the training contributes to the overall success of the practice.

**Time.** Do not interrupt the training – and do not let team members interrupt the training either. Hopefully, training will be provided in manageable sections, not compacted into an eight-hour day. According to adult education research, the ideal length of a training session is 20 to 60 minutes.

**Resources.** Support your staff as they develop the training program and provide additional materials. For example, you might say, “I found a book that talks about the training topics you will cover on Friday. Why don’t you review Chapter 4 and then we can talk about it.”

**Attention.** After the training session, meet with the learner to talk about the newly learned skills. Monitor performance of the tasks, evaluate the results of the training, and provide ongoing feedback.

**Rewards.** When employees develop new abilities, they must be recognized with the rewards of both praise and pay increases.

## Conclusion

Employees are happiest when they continue the learning curve and see their skills grow. The time and resources you devote to training will bring many benefits to your practice:

- Improved profitability
- Stronger team morale
- Better image of the practice
- Increased quality of treatment
- Decreased conflicts
- Reduced stress
- Higher job satisfaction

## References

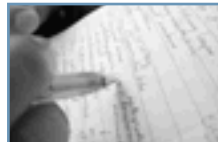
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American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry  
211 E. Chicago Avenue-Suite 700  
Chicago, IL 60611-2663

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