Building Highly Effective Teams

By Linda Ross Aldy, executive director, Mississippi Optometric Association

Teamwork is a goal in every office environment, no matter what the business or industry. What is teamwork and why does everyone strive to develop it, enhance it, and improve it?

Simply stated, teamwork means that those who work together do so for the common good of the team and not for individual gain or recognition. In an optometry practice, it means that everyone is working for the good of the patient and for the success of the overall practice. It means that every paraoptometric in the office is willing to work in harmony to reach a common goal.

Creating a healthy environment or culture in which a team can grow and flourish takes a bit of work and a lot of commitment on the part of the practice owner, the office manager, and the team members.

It's about people

Hiring the right team members and giving them both the training and a great work environment are very important keys to success. The old business adage of “hire for attitude, train for skill” probably has its roots in customer service team-building! "You can't teach employees to smile—they have to smile before you hire them" is a quote attributed to Arte Nathan, an award-winning Human Resources director.

Recognizing that a team needs different skill sets for the different positions in the office often means the team is going to be made up of various personalities and behavioral styles as well. Each personality and behavioral style has its own unique set of strengths and weaknesses. One team may consist of individuals who are quiet, while others may be outgoing. Some may be fast-paced and others slower and more deliberate in their actions. The different styles and approaches to work may create some misunderstandings among the team when it comes to perception of others’ work performance.

Understanding that different personalities and behavioral styles may view things from different perspectives is critical to the success of a work team. Consider completing the Myers-Briggs (personality style) inventory or DISC – Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, Compliance (behavior style) inventory to get a better understanding of your team’s profiles. (Visit [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator) or [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DISC_assessment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DISC_assessment) for additional information.) Team members may be better able to understand their styles, as well as share with other team members what type of behavioral and personality style best describes them.
In addition to having the right people in the right positions, it is equally important to have people with positive attitudes and appropriate skill sets. A high-functioning team understands, without question, what the common goal is for the team and how their particular roles move the team toward the goal.

**Moving Toward the Goal Together--What’s your Mission Statement?**

A *Mission Statement* is vital to the success of a business as a whole. A mission statement is a practice’s means to communicate to its patients, employees, and the entire community the purpose of its existence. It states to patients why they should come to the office for care and to employees what the practice cares about.

If a practice does not have a written mission statement, it is recommended to include staff input in writing one. Practitioners may discover it is not as easy as it sounds, but the time invested in establishing one is well worth the effort. Once a mission statement is understood by all staff members, it can bring a certain focus to the staff in terms of the purpose of their work and the value of their contribution.

*Goal-setting* involves establishing *specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-targeted (S.M.A.R.T)* objectives. Goal-setting ensures the team members have a common goal and are clearly aware of what is expected from them.

Effective measures to encourage positive outcomes for goals are:

- Make sure the goals are put in writing and communicated to every employee
- Post them in the break room or common area so that every team member can see them
- Measure and chart them so staff can visibly see how the team is doing in reaching the goals
- Communicate specific staff duties or responsibilities to do to reach the goals
- Discuss any challenges that may be preventing the team from successfully achieving the goals

“You are only as strong as your weakest link” is a common saying. It is important that staff not only understand how the individual contributes, but also how the work of all team members contribute to meeting the overall goal. Staff will have a combination of strengths and weaknesses in their work performance. Identify what the strengths are of each staff member and build upon those strengths to achieve the goals. What may be one person’s weakness may be another’s strength.

**Managing Differences Before They Become Conflicts**

There will be situations from time to time in which two (or more) well-meaning people have differences of opinion on what should be done or how it should be handled. Conflict in the workplace just seems to be a fact of life.

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified five main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) that helps identify which style one tends toward when conflict arises.
Thomas and Kilmann's styles are as follows:

**Competitive:** This style usually operates from a position of power, taking a firm stand, and knowing what they want. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast or when a decision is unpopular.

**Collaborative:** This style tries to meet the needs of all people involved. Someone who has this style can be highly assertive without making others feel inferior. They tend to make everyone feel important. This style takes a variety of viewpoints before making a decision.

**Compromising:** The compromising style tries to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. This is the “Win-Win” style. Everyone gives a little for the betterment of the whole.

**Accommodating:** This style proves to be highly cooperative. Accommodation is the “peacemaker” style. This style will give in to others wishing the favor will be returned in other areas, but unfortunately human nature does not always guarantee the favor will be returned by all.

**Avoiding:** This style could be defined like the ostrich sticking its head in the sand, hoping the situation will quietly disappear, and they will not have to deal with it. This style doesn’t want to hurt other’s feelings. If they can delegate to others the responsibility of resolving the conflict, they will. For the most part this is a weak and ineffective approach to take.

Ultimately, conflict can be resolved by adopting an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people’s legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships.

By resolving conflict one can gain many benefits and help reaching the team’s goals.

- **Increased understanding:** Awareness of the different personality types helps staff understand the individual styles involved when they work together. They will see how the goals can be achieved by utilizing the strengths of all personality types rather than by just one type.
- **Increased group cohesion:** The team will develop stronger mutual respect for each other and increased faith in their ability to work together.
- **Improved self-knowledge:** Team members will be able to determine what things are most important to them, sharpen their focus, and enhance the effectiveness of working as a team.

**Tips for Creating a Teamwork Culture**

1. Establish some guiding rules regarding employee privacy and employee rights. This provides a framework for “principle-centered” policies and procedures.
2. Provide opportunities for staff to work on projects or tasks with different staff members by creating “work groups.” Mix it up so the same people are not always working together.
3. Make sure you are keeping staff “in the loop” on what's happening with the practice. Communication is a must in meeting goals.
4. Celebrate good team behavior. Link performance with reward. Look for it and recognize it immediately. It may just be a personal “thank you” or an impromptu announcement, but whatever gesture is chosen, staff morale will be lifted.

5. Present to the team some organizational challenges that will stimulate creative thinking and excitement from staff to contribute ideas for solutions.

6. Conduct employee opinion surveys. Let staff know their opinion, and concerns count.

7. Include funds in your budget for staff development and training. Provide training for areas of weakness that will increase skills and knowledge base. Training will provide opportunities for staff to experience professional growth and improve overall attitude and performance.

8. Plan some “fun” activities throughout the year to help unite your team. Plato said, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”

Staying Patient Focused

As individuals and as team members, it is important to remember the patient and the patient’s experience is the key to success for the team. Work to ensure that every contact with a patient is a positive one. Remember, creating an effective relationship with your customers, patients (external) and co-workers (internal), gains trust and respect that will carry the practitioner and the team into a higher level of productivity and service.

Great teams are worth the investment of time and energy! By setting goals, resolving conflicts, and creating a positive, rewarding work environment, staff will understand that being part of a great team is an amazing experience.

References

1 http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm

Linda Ross Aldy serves as Executive Director of the Mississippi Optometric Association and serves on the faculty of Mississippi’s State Personnel Board Training Division. She serves on Mississippi Nurses’ Foundation Board of Directors as well as having just completed a term on the Mississippi Society of Association Executives Board of Directors. She is a graduate of Mississippi University for Women, the Stennis Center Executive Management Institute, Leadership Mississippi and has completed coursework through the University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School, Executive Development Program and has earned the Certified Association Executive (CAE).
Building Highly Effective Teams

To receive one hour of continuing education credit, those taking the quiz must be an AOA Associate member and answer seven of the 10 questions correctly. This exam consists of multiple-choice questions designed to measure the level of understanding of the material covered in the continuing education article “Building Highly Effective Teams.” This article is worth one hour of continuing education credit from the Commission on Paraoptometric Certification.
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Select the option that best answers the question.

1. Which of these is not an element of a goal?
   (a) Sensible
   (b) Attainable
   (c) Realistic
   (d) Timed

2. Of the five conflict resolution types, which is the least effective?
   (a) Compromising
   (b) Accommodating
   (c) Avoiding
   (d) Competitive

3. Which inventory tool helps understand personality types?
   (a) TKI
   (b) OWEI
   (c) Myers-Briggs
   (d) SMART
4. Fill in the blanks in the old business adage: “Hire for __________, Train for __________”?  
   (a) Today, tomorrow  
   (b) Less, more  
   (c) The office, the patient  
   (d) Attitude, skill  

5. Who are “internal” customers?  
   (a) Patients  
   (b) Walk-ins  
   (c) Phone inquiries  
   (d) Co-workers  

6. Accommodation is which type of style?  
   (a) Win-Win  
   (b) Peacemaker  
   (c) Head in the sand  
   (d) Position of power  

7. Which instrument identifies the level of cooperativeness and assertiveness in dealing with conflict resolution?  
   (a) Conflict Mode Instrument (CMI)  
   (b) Conflict Resolution Assessment (CRA)  
   (c) Myers-Briggs Inventory  
   (d) Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)  

8. Which of the following is NOT true as one of the benefits of resolving conflicts?  
   (a) Stronger mutual respect for each other is gained  
   (b) Goals can be achieved by standing your ground  
   (c) Improved self-knowledge  
   (d) Increased understanding about other personality types  

9. What communicates to patients, staff and the community why the practice exists?  
   (a) Business Plan  
   (b) Mission Statement  
   (c) Goals Statement  
   (d) Marketing Plan  

10. What does the acronym SMART stand for?  
    (a) Simple, Manageable, Attainable, Realistic Targets  
    (b) Strategies, Measurable Actions, Resources and Technology  
    (c) Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-targeted  
    (d) Staff Management and Results Timeline