

## In Search of Staff Harmony, Part II

Okay, so the term “smooth” should more appropriately apply to the late crooner, Luther Vandross. Our quest for staff harmony was not without multiple bumps in the road. Was it all worth it? Here is the remainder of the story.

Let me begin by saying that we have not only maintained our relationship with Greg Zlevor, but it has markedly strengthened over this past year. Without his knowledge, expertise, patience and perseverance, we would not be where we are now. Today, more than a year after we began our journey, there is less conflict, less volatility and far greater stability in our practice.

During this past year, every member of our team has worked to create positive, lasting change. Some, more than others. A weakened economy has prompted us to work harder and with far greater focus on making our patients and our referring doctors happy. Our staff has led the way in the area of customer service. However, we have not taken these positive changes for granted and we continue to work on practice improvement.

So, what is different? Our personal and professional interactions have evolved. We recognize our differences and respect them. When we have conflicts, we now have the tools to overcome them. Although negativity can creep into the picture at times, it becomes quite transparent and we can more effectively turn it around.

An example of this follows. Initially, Bob and I were concerned about our assistants’ attitudes. They would complain about how difficult it would be to manage the schedule for upcoming days, even before they arrived. There would be little strategic planning and instead, a lot of anxiety and negative comments. We had observed that many of these days would work out well and the assistants would agree that they really didn’t have to worry after all. This, however, did not change their behavior. About midway through the program we had to add some days to the work schedule. This necessitated Bob and I working together in the office at the same time, which is not normally the case. These days are usually busier and require careful planning. I informed one of our assistants and her facial

expression changed from a smile to a frown right before my eyes. She then began to complain about how difficult things are and how it’s just “too busy.” I said nothing at the time. No longer than 15 minutes later she entered my private office and apologized for her demeanor and poor attitude and clearly recognized that her response was inappropriate. Although there have been moments of “slippage” over the past 6 months, this type of behavior is now a thing of the past.

What about the bumps in the road? Yes, as you can see, we have had our setbacks along the way. Everyone tends to fall into the safe patterns of their old behavior at times, especially when involved in stressful situations. Overall, implementation has been far more important than the obstacles we have faced.

As mentioned in the previous article, Greg started the program by interviewing Bob and me, along with our staff members. He continued these interviews throughout the year in order to understand how each individual was progressing in their development. In addition to spending time with each of us individually on-site, he also made himself available via phone and e-mail whenever needed. Our staff made the most of these opportunities and appreciated Greg’s willingness to be there for them. Everyone filled out postcards that were sent periodically as a way of communicating thoughts and ideas in a confidential manner. This feedback led to strategic planning which in turn prompted simple actions. These actions will hopefully lead to long-term changes in the way we work together and relate to each other. We have learned that it doesn’t take extraordinary actions to be great. Instead, it only takes doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.

During our year of “enlightenment” we were introduced to the latest information on team-building, emotional intelligence and personal development. We learned to challenge our perceptions and understand that open communication leads to improved work performance. We used our personal strengths to identify problems on an individual and practice level, brainstorm solutions and reach decisions together, and then implement the solutions that we decided were the best.



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From the beginning, Bob and I recognized that communicating with our staff was difficult at times. We also recognized that if this did not improve, we would be jeopardizing future practice growth and personal sanity. Greg provided us with the tools to understand one another, insights and methods to practice the new behavior that we were taught, and the coaching to make it stick.

One of the first tools that we used (and found especially helpful) was the “Listening Assessment.” This tool demonstrates the listening approach for each team member, along with how their particular approach affects the rest of the team. It also shows everyone how each team member listens and communicates. Consequently, we learned how to “hear” communication from a team member with a different approach than our own and also learned how to communicate with someone who listens differently than we do.

Once we had an understanding of how to listen and communicate more effectively, Greg introduced the “Team Dimensions Profile” to teach us the importance of working from our individual strengths and sharing these with our team so that we could work in unison to create our vision for the future. This helped us to uncover our staff’s strengths, and allowed us to identify how each member of the team was best suited to work towards change. It also helped Bob and me to better recognize our strengths as leaders and to understand how our staff members complement us and the practice as a whole.

For example, two of our employees were not really fond of each other and avoided contact whenever possible. Although they did not really think that their non-communication was affecting our workplace, this really wasn’t the case. It wasn’t about maintaining the status-quo; it was really about lacking the opportunity to create synergy. It wasn’t about the lack of negativity; it was about the inability to create positive and supportive interaction between the two which would benefit our patients. Working with the “Listening Assessment” and “Team Dimensions Profile” tools, the problem between these two individuals literally disappeared. Both began to recognize that if they acknowledged and accepted their respective differences, their strengths would become complementary assets. This allowed everyone on our staff to utilize their

talents while respecting the different styles and approaches of each team member. Furthermore, the values and behaviors that were identified in earlier work sessions, including the focus on being respectful, became the foundation from which the team worked.

Although we were aware of each staff member’s strengths, there was a tendency to focus and dwell on the weaknesses. I’m sure that this is not unique to Cohen & Gottlieb. It’s probably just human nature. In Greg Zlevor’s experience, when something isn’t working, employers often inform their staff members about their weaknesses and ask them to fix “the situation.” Yet, research shows this to be the least effective way to cultivate change for the better. Dentists should ask themselves several questions about their staff members when considering steps to increase effectiveness and productivity. These include:

- What are the strengths of the individuals on my team?
- Which staff members are good with the details?
- Which individuals can innovate and create new ideas and motivate the others to make change?
- Which team members can see both sides of a conflict and help others recognize and accept compromise?
- Which staff members are great at getting tasks done?
- Who are the “people persons” in the office? (Those who most easily connect with others.)

With the answers to these questions we can begin to develop strategies and an action plan, playing to the strengths of each individual staff member. Working from strengths is more effective and efficient than focusing on and trying to fix weaknesses.

Bob and I sat down and discussed what we perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of each of our staff members. During our team sessions our objective was to acknowledge who best fit the answers to the above ques-

tions and to reinforce our confidence in these individuals.

Yes, it is inevitable that some members of the team are best off working on someone else's team. The chemistry isn't always right and during our year with Greg, we did lose one employee. This ultimately ended up being a win-win situation because we moved on with an individual better suited to help us realize our vision and the employee found a job which was a better fit and allowed her to continue to grow to her maximum potential.

What we learned in replacing this employee is that most employers in small companies have a tendency to hire "themselves." Leaders often seek to hire individuals where there will potentially be little or no conflict. On the other hand, even small businesses require a variety of skills and styles in order to be successful. It is much more advantageous to hire different skills and styles that complement your own. Different is better. Different people, with various styles and approaches, who learn to work together, are the best suited to run an office successfully.

Finally, there are always interpersonal conflicts and situations which can arise, often without warning. Using the "HeartMath" system we learned how to avoid being reactionary and to stay centered when facing a challenge. Greg taught us the language and process of "HeartMath" using a handheld device called the "emWave" Personal Stress Reliever that measures heart rate variability (HRV). The "emWave" does not measure an individual's heart rate. Instead it measures the time between each heart beat. This information provides users with valuable information about their stress levels and offers users the ability to achieve higher emotional stability, increased mental clarity, and improved cognitive function. Research has shown that achieving a higher state of harmony in our psychological and physiological processes increases our ability to be more resourceful and "present" in difficult situations. The "HeartMath" device is used by professional athletes, executives and individuals who want to learn how to reduce stress and function at a higher level. With the use of this device, Bob and I became aware that our staff members could control their stress levels far better than the two of us! However, over time even we learned how to focus on mind over matter and reduce our own stress levels.

All in all, Greg spent seven, two-day sessions with us over a 12 month period. The first day was usually spent interviewing our staff members. One-half day was set aside with our entire staff in team building sessions. The remainder of the time was spent with Greg in consultation and in planning our next steps for the following visit.

Each and every one of us at Cohen & Gottlieb recognizes that we will need to continually work on maintaining and practicing all that we have learned over this past year. We all know that this is going to be a challenge, but we are confident that the ammunition we now hold in our arsenal will serve us well. We have grown immensely and as difficult as it has been at times, I think everyone feels it has been well worth it.

Would we do it again? Yes, without a doubt.

Did we achieve our goal? Yes, and then some.

Would we recommend this for other offices? For those who understand that this is a long and arduous journey, that the reward will be significant improvement and not necessarily a complete fix and that a more harmonious future can be a reality, the answer is a resounding *yes!*

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