

When “Change” Becomes a “Bad” Word!
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The new buzz word is “Change.” Our dictionary defines “change” as: *to make the form, nature, content, future course, etc., of (something) different from what it is or from what it would be if left alone; a transformation or modification; alteration.* Change is a very powerful event. Change for the purpose of making something different may not always have positive results when applied to dentistry. Managed incorrectly, it can represent chaos, loss, and unfortunately destruction.

Managing change in the acquisition of a dental practice is a delicate balance. Often a new owner feels the previous owner operated his or her business ineffectively. In many instances that makes perfect sense. However, the worst thing a new owner can do within the *first six months to even a year of the acquisition*, is to make changes without understanding their consequences. Part of the investment in the business is dependent on producing at the same level as the previous owner to cover operating expenses.

The challenge is knowing when and how to manage the changes you want in the practice effectively. This is where the change event becomes a transition process. Here are three important transition suggestions:

1. Work with your new team to learn how they have been running the business.

Understand how the team’s previous philosophy was formed. **Make** time to talk with each team member individually during the first month of acquisition. You may have already interviewed them before acquisition, but meet with them again. This time ask about their concerns, feelings about the transition, etc. Begin to earn their trust by recognizing their skills, experience, and devotion to the practice. Watch how they interface with patients to learn what they do right! Listen to hear how they have established relationships with the patients, not just to criticize them for communication errors or mistakes. Compliment them when possible and begin to help them feel your objective is to take the practice forward.

Don’t forget that this business has lost a major player...the former dentist. The change of a key figure in any business will most likely cause some loss. The circumstances around that loss also become a factor, such as a death or disability which may have prompted the sale of the business. You help minimize the experience of the loss by developing a positive working relationship with your new team. In my experience, the retention of the team is extremely valuable to the retention of the patients.

2. Bring new ideas to positive team meetings. Even though you have many ideas about how to improve the practice for everyone, wait and approach the team with the new ideas in a safe environment where you can discuss pros and cons. Work on communication skills for addressing patients when implementing the new ideas. Don’t make the meetings too long. Use some of the time to talk about fun ideas such as marketing! Ask

for input and respect the team's direction. You don't have to implement everything, but having the new owner actually listen will bring amazing results. Once the team sees how the new idea/s work they will begin to trust and become more open to future changes.

3. Pace your changes by determining the absolutes of what you must implement and establish the areas, protocols, policies, you can adjust as time moves forward.

I know of a practice transition where the new dentist insisted on an FMX for every patient immediately after taking ownership. Yes, important. However, the recare appointment went from an hour to two hours including much more than the FMX. This may be the correct thing to do for the patient. However, the perception from many patients was negative, to the point of leaving the practice.

The better approach would have been to let the patient make the decision. If the patient has time, is open to the new protocol, fully understands the reasoning behind it...great! Just a word of caution, be very careful not to belittle the former dentist in an effort to convince the patient of the need. The patient's loyalty was to the previous dentist. Speaking negatively about the previous dentist (even if you believe the patient deserves different care) can make a patient distrustful of your recommendation. If the patient is not comfortable, note their response in the chart and at the next visit offer it again. This applies to restorative work as well. Don't oversell or push your agenda. Your job is to build relationships on the first encounter, not change their dental care overnight. Hopefully, this will ensure a next visit!

The transitional change process in dentistry is complex. Change without transition does not equate to positive results. For more information about how to manage a practice transition effectively, contact Susan Spear, SAS Transitions Dental Practice Brokers at 303-973-2147 or susan@sastransitions.com