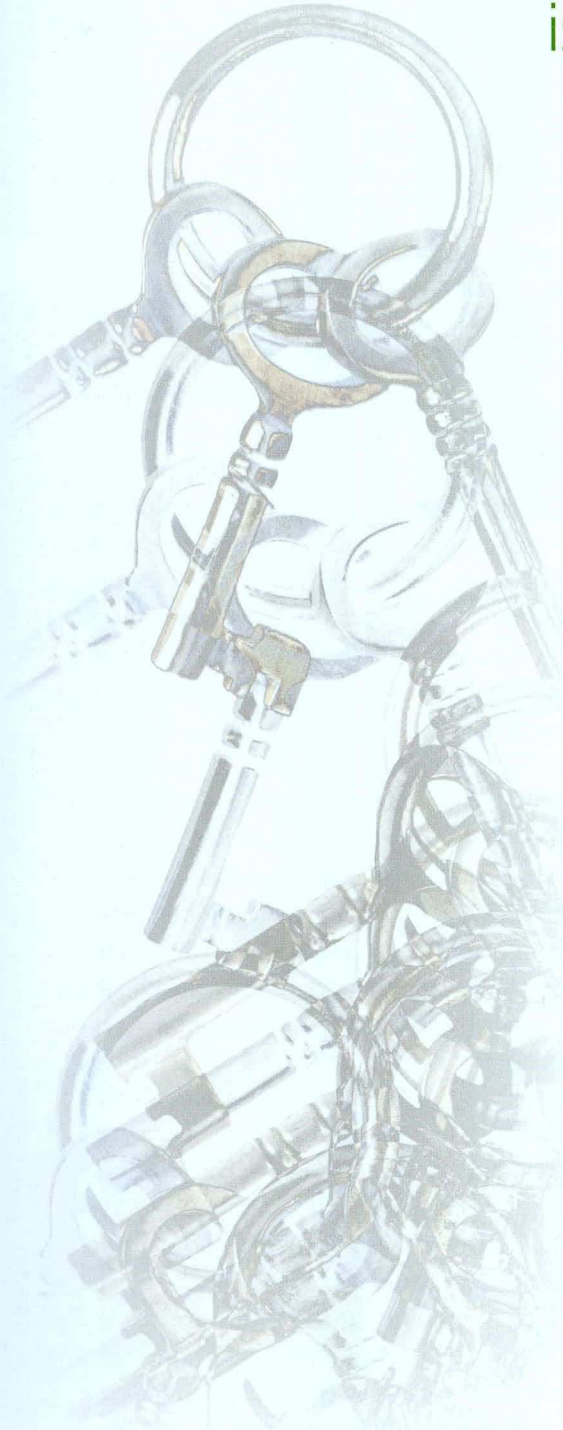


Communication is the Key



Like so many journeys in life you learn just as much from the mistakes you make, as you do from the successes. When I started my practice, I admit I made plenty of mistakes. One of my largest blunders was keeping my goals and plans for the practice to myself. I believe it stemmed from either a lack of confidence or a concern about the potential loss of any competitive advantage, but it doesn't matter what the reasons were, the end result was a negative effect on my practice.

Holding things "close to my chest", and keeping my staff, my team, in the dark did nothing to help move my practice forward. Keeping them on a "need to know" basis only made it more difficult for the practice to do well. How were they suppose to know where we were going if I didn't communicate this clearly to them?

Then it dawned on me that I could never reach my practice goals without the help of others. I couldn't grow from a single doctor to multiple doctors, from 2 staff to over 30 team members, from a few hundred thousand in gross income to a few million in gross without the help of others. However, just hiring employees doesn't get you where you want to be nearly as fast as having them buy in and really participate in building your vision of the best optometric practice.

It all starts with your vision for the practice. Then you have to be willing to share that vision as well as allow others to shape the plan so they can buy-in to the goals. It starts with a shared mission, or purpose for the practice and then a statement of practice values that your team



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will work under to realize your mission and goals. A significant part of communication is listening, so it's important that you listen to the input that your team provides to you.

The most important step in making this happen is effective communication with your team. You have to be able to describe what you feel the perfect practice should be. Start with the end in mind and work backward from there.

You need to communicate why the vision is important, how they can participate (their role) and how they will be rewarded when positive steps towards these goals are made (what's in it for them). It is not enough to do this at a staff meeting once a year you have to constantly bring up these plans, and goals at every opportunity.

Your job then is to communicate often and effectively with your team. You cannot communicate with your team too often. It may seem repetitive to you but your staff does not perceive it that way, they need to know that your practice is living these goals daily. In this case, redundancy and repetition are helpful in communicating effectively.

Make sure your plans and goals are clear and concise. Have your mission and values summarized and use them at every opportunity. It is important to make it as concise as possible. People can only remember a few items at a time so distill your goals down to no more than three and highlight them at every opportunity.

How you communicate is just as important as what you communicate. You have many vehicles at your disposal, the most effective of these are face-to-face meetings. Whether it is with individuals or in teams, meetings can be the best way to reinforce the goals of the practice. The main drawback with meetings is that it is often difficult to schedule them and have all staff be present

at one time, this is especially true in larger practices.

Many offices use memos to get the word out but this has limitations because it is only a one-way conversation, and doesn't allow for easy feedback. Sometimes this type of communication can actually hurt you if your staff feel these messages are being sent from "above" as directives, without team participation. Memos have to be used carefully for they can have a negative effect on your efforts.

With a large number of staff, and multiple locations we had to look at imaginative solutions. Around the time we were

investigating this, the internet and email were just starting to become popular. We latched onto this technology and we now communicate literally many times daily with individuals, with a select few or all staff, depending on the topic. It also has the advantage of allowing for two-way communication. Although, you do have to be careful because email cannot transmit your tone or passion, you need to use clear and positive language. When added to face-to-face interactions, email can be a valuable tool.

You should make an effort to share all the news about your practice (good and bad) as soon as possible with your team. If you don't communicate quickly, the grapevine will and it is far better for your team to hear accurate information from you than to have damage done by myths or rumours. Your team understands that plans may change and they will appreciate the effort you make in keeping them informed. When you see positive steps towards your goals you need to communicate this quickly to reinforce the plan and start the momentum. If there is bad news, communicate this clearly as well but seek, and offer solutions on how to improve the situation.

Make your messages clear and concise, communicate it often and watch your practice grow. 