

The Coaches Corner

THE PRECIPITATING EVENT

Mary just called your office and told the front desk person that she doesn't want to go ahead with the treatment that you had scheduled. She cancelled the appointment and said she would "get back to you" to reschedule.

Whammo!

What to do? There are several options: you do some serious blocking and feign indifference, get upset and make yourself and everyone around you nuts, or do some deep breathing and move on. Obviously number 3 is preferable, but it is still not enough. I suggest that when events like this happen (and yes doctor they happen more frequently than we'd like to publicly admit), we use them as opportunities. Our mishaps can become challenges that generate very positive changes if we have the courage to look at them squarely.

What does squarely mean? It doesn't mean that if you read on I will guarantee an 87% treatment acceptance rate, or an absolutely foolproof method or techniques to build the million dollar practice, or for that matter any statistic that make me sound guru-like. My name is Alan Goldstein and I practice dentistry on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. I cater to folks who want fine dental care (it's the only kind I do), modern technology, and a high level of personalized service. Ten years ago I began to focus on progressive management and leadership literature that explored advanced business practices. This led me to the field of coaching. As my interest intensified I enrolled in a one-year Professional Coaching Course. I completed this in February 2001 and became a certified coach. My patients, my staff, and indeed everyone in my life have benefited from my newfound coaching skills.

—You can too.

THE APPROACH

Spring training is underway for major-league baseball. What happens in spring training? The players prepare in a variety of ways, with great intensity, for the upcoming season. This preparation is geared to minimize errors once the season starts. Once a pitcher gives up a home run or a fielder commits an error, it's difficult to recover. Too many errors can lead to a lost game and even start a downward spiral to a losing season. Yes it is true that we can (and do!) learn from our errors, but it's far better to prepare for them in advance.

The "Mary" phone call doesn't leave a lot of room, at least initially, for anything but self-flagellation. You could blame Mary for not appreciating the brilliance of our treatment plan, but that approach never provided me with much solace. Better to use our own version of spring training and prepare for the problem before it happens—then see in fact how effective the training was.

For example:

THINGS TO CONSIDER

1. Examine the appointment when the treatment plan was presented. Was that done well? Were you calm? Were you appropriately enthusiastic and yet reassuring? Was the financial piece done properly? Were you on time for the appointment and were there no interruptions? What was the mood in the room, in the office? What evidence do you have of the patient's concerns? Is your office congruent in all ways with this level of dentistry, I mean neat, clean, aesthetically pleasing, and so forth. And probably most importantly, do you know if your responses to these questions are indeed accurate?
2. Now let's move on to the person who took the call. What was this player's spring training like? Is she or he comfortable collecting five-figure payments? Is this player competent in terms of her communication and relationship skills? Did she or he inquire into Mary's immediate concerns and try to re-enroll her? Was she or he able to engage Mary and find out the reason for the cancellation? Have role-plays been used to help your player develop these skills?
3. How about the rest of the team? How are the telephone skills and the interpersonal skills of everyone, including and especially the doctor? Are the relationships among staff-members good models for the kind of relationships you want with your patients? What practices does your staff engage in to cultivate these skills?

A really good coach will lead a client down a path and much as Aristotle did, will help that person reach the answers on his or her own. After all, as in any area of life, if you're given the answers you don't really own them, and then you are no closer than you were at the beginning to make any substantial and long-lasting changes. No real growth can occur without teaching the tools for self-reliance. It is a bit like clearing away the weeds so that the possibility of real growth

can take place. And that, my friends, is the difference between a coach and a consultant or practice management person.

“So, what does a coach do, specifically?” The coach first understands and assesses the world-view of the person. Using various models (grounded in phenomenology, pragmatism and hermeneutics) the coach helps that person see the world as it presents itself. The coach offers distinctions that carry some weight. Next the coach designs a program for the dentist and the staff that will include new practices, reading and self-observation exercises that will generate new learning and in turn new behavior—behavior that will last for the long-term. Now while this may sound a tad complex, its rewards are no less than the self-conscious development of excellence.

I use these coaching principals in my practice. They are incorporated in our bi-weekly staff meetings. Coaching has allowed all of us to go way beyond excellent telephone skills and great collection techniques. It has, in fact has helped me advance my dental capacities. As a staff, we are in a place where effectiveness and fulfillment co-mingle. A place of great competency and great joy.

Perhaps this is not for everyone, but for those taking the journey, the rewards are enormous.

GOALS OF COACHING

- **Long-Term Excellent Performance**

- **Self-Correction**

This means that when errors are made the entire staff is able to do some analysis (not blaming) and make corrections. This should able to be done as a staff as well as individually.

- **Self-Generation**

To be self-generating means that every person on the staff is able, individually, to generate his or her own plan for growth and development. This can be done as a staff as well.

E-mail me if you want to know more.

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RECOMMENDED READING

COACHING: Evoking Excellence In Others by James Flaherty
(published by Butterworth/Heinemann.)

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Steven Covey