

Manage Toward Continuous Improvement

By Larry M. Guzzardo

Reduce stress, gain more time for planning, and resolve conflicts.

- ☆ **Get everyone involved.** Ask for total participation from the entire staff. Solving problems involves change and forcing change on staff members who have not participated in the process will result in resistance.
- ☆ **No blame, judgment, or finger pointing.** Problem solving requires lots of open communication. Concentrate on moving forward - let ideas flow.
- ☆ **Work Your Plan.** Decide on action to take and monitor your progress. Do what you say you'll do. Not going in the right direction? Time for discussion at a staff meeting to determine what steps to take next.
- ☆ **Follow these Steps:**

State the problem. State the problem in terms of results. For example, “*hygiene recall has fallen below 85% of the patients due*” is a problem statement. “*Patients are not keeping up with their recall visits*” is not a problem statement. This is more like suggesting a solution.

Find the cause of the problem. Do not ignore this step, even if the solution seems obvious. The answer to patients not keeping up with their recall visits is obviously for them to start coming in. But if the answer were that simple, would you really have a problem? Real causes are rarely obvious. You must dig into the problem. Are patients not aware of the importance of their appointments? Do we create reasons for their return? Do patients understand what they are being told?

Solutions should be unique to your problem. Solving problems allows you to use your creativity, so don't be timid with your ideas. Find as many solutions as possible, then pick the best one. Some solutions should be unusual. Maybe if patients had to be dental assistants for a few weeks, their appreciation for regular visits would grow.

Get to the root of the problem. Do not worry about solving symptoms. Failure comes from fighting symptoms instead of problems. When you defeat a symptom, a new one surely will appear. This will continue until you solve the real problem. If you ignore the symptoms and solve the problem, the symptoms will disappear. If patients do not see the need for regular recall visits, the threat of tooth loss may get them in this time. But next time you'll have to go right back after them because they will fall behind and then find it necessary to have emergency treatment for an undiagnosed condition. And just when you thought you had one problem solved.

Apply the solution. Good intentions mean nothing if there is no action. Because problem solving involves change, this step is most often the most difficult. Staff do not like change unless they feel it benefits them. Explain the changes as positive steps to make everyone's life easier.

Monitor your progress to make sure the solution works. Actively monitor the problem for at least 90-days. You'll know if the solution works. If not, did you really find the problem? Can the solution really fix the problem? If the solution is working, check to see if minor problems (symptoms) have disappeared.

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