Want to Be a World-Class Practice Administrator?  
Treat Staff as Customers

Allan Walker

Truly insightful practice administrators view staff as customers who deserve the same world-class treatment afforded patients.

For a practice to earn and sustain a reputation as a provider of world-class customer service, practice administrators need to understand that they actually serve two distinct and unique customer bases—external patients and internal staff members. While the need to provide consistent and exceptional service to patients is obvious and paramount—they pay the bills and sustain the practice—truly insightful practice administrators view staff as customers who deserve the same world-class treatment afforded patients.

Case Study

The administrator program roundtable discussion is going well, and the audience appears engaged and enthusiastic. However, Mr. Sirvis cannot help but notice more than a few quizzical looks when he mentions that he views his staff as his customers, not just as employees. About to conclude a rewarding 25-year career as a respected practice administrator of a large, multi-location practice in the Northwest, he struggles to understand why so many of his colleagues do not appear to embrace the internal-customer concept. “It is a philosophy and style that works so well,” he explains. “I know our staff appreciates such a respectful approach to the employment relationship; our high staff retention ratio and monitored employee satisfaction rates confirm that this attitude is well received. And I know our staff is quick to pass this professionalism and respect on to our patients. It’s a win-win for everyone, including myself.”

Self-Improvement

As a practice’s most accessible and visible day-to-day leader, the practice administrator is responsible for building a perpetual, strong, and functional team. One of the best ways to accomplish that task is to embrace a staff-as-customer philosophy built on following these self-
improvement tenets.

**Engage in self-reflection.** Periodically take some time to assess the state of the practice from a personal perspective. Your goal is to work on being the best practice administrator and person possible. Ask and answer the tough questions: What is the overall mood of the practice? How do I impact that mood? How do individual staff members view me and my style? What is the staff respect level for members view and treat your staff. Change can be good and should not be viewed as weakness. Many successful leaders (and practices) excel because they embrace and welcome change as motivation for personal and professional progress. Try to gain insight into what blocks you from accepting change. It is hard to simply “flip the switch” and change behavior or style overnight. Provide yourself daily reminders and try to focus on getting a little better each day.

**Encourage open and honest communication.** The more candid your interaction with staff, the more they will respect and trust your decision-making and leadership abilities. Continue to hone your communication skills, both verbal and listening. Learn how to praise outstanding effort, as well as how to effectively criticize or critique performance in order to motivate and encourage. A proper level of respect helps ensure a positive, proactive approach that can result in remarkable increases in efficiency and productivity.

**Promote fair and equal treatment.** Make a noticeable effort to get to know each staff member a little better. Try not to treat certain employees differently, even if they do stand out from the crowd. There will be opportunities to honor top performers, but your day-to-day M.O. should revolve around being fair and consistent. Try to learn what motivates or drives individuals in the office. Learn who they are, what makes them tick, and to what type of leadership they respond. Look for opportunities each day to improve a relationship with a team member.

**Champion professional growth.** Professional and personal education should be a never-ending endeavor. Continue to educate yourself in all aspects of your job. Yes, it is important to be current on all specific medical, clinical, and business advancements, but do not ignore your personal growth. Learning is directly related to teaching and helping, and that is what a good practice administrator does. The more you grow, the more you can teach your staff. Read, learn, think … and pass it on.

**Set high standards.** Setting the bar too high is rarely a problem, especially if you “walk the walk,” and your staff knows it and sees it. Act the part. Dress the part. Lead by example. Be visible and engaged. Interact in an open and honest manner; however, learn to do so with greater sensitivity and compassion for others. Don’t be aloof. Be ready to roll up your sleeves and get it done. Be accessible and available. Everyone has a life outside of work; understand that it will enter the work environment once in a while. Encourage time with family. Be there for your staff; they will gladly follow your example.

**Point of View**

Remarkable things can happen when practice administrators begin to view staff as customers. Everyone—staff members and you—gets to eliminate the wasted time and energy worrying about what others think and instead are able to focus on the task at hand. Treating everyone the same way in every walk of life simply makes it easier to always be at peace. For some, this takes great courage, since it might in fact be unnatural to think and act this way. At the same time, doing so often allows organizations to gain incredible increases in productivity and efficiency. Most importantly, coming to work every day becomes much more fun for everyone.