



Attitude and Communication Skills

“The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than success, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company, a church, or a home.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one thing we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you. We are in charge of our Attitudes.”

- Charles Swindoll

The power of our attitude is the real key to success. In fact, attitude will make or break a dental office.

An attitude is what you tell yourself about your situation. Feelings are attitudes and attitudes are feelings.

The Million Dollar Question:

Whose attitude is most important in the dental office?

Each and every person working in the dental office. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. If just one person has a negative, cynical or fatalistic attitude, then the practice will have problems such as staff turnover and patients leaving. This is because of the Projection Principle.

The Projection Principle says the attitude you project towards others will be reflected back to you in reality.

This phenomenon has been studied with rats. One group of students was told that they had smart rats, a second group was told that they had dumb rats. When the students ran their rats through the maze, those that had been told that their rats were smart ended up doing better than those whose rats were described as dumb. The reason was that the attitude of the students was reflected onto the rats.

Not one dumb rat completed the maze in the allotted amount of time, but all of the smart rats did. (It should be noted that all the rats were identical.)

The same thing happens in dental practices. For example, Dr. Shortfuse grumbles under his/her breath, is angry, speaks in short and curt tones to the staff and may even yell or throw instruments. The staff walks on eggshells and avoids the doctor, if possible. When they want to leave at 5 o'clock, the doctor says that they really aren't team players. What the doctor does not know is that the staff is simply projecting back the attitude that he has expressed to them. Attitude is the first key ingredient in energizing the team.

How can the team change the doctor? They can't. But they can change their attitudes. If the staff changes, the climate will also change. This is called the Self Reflexive Feedback Loop:

He doesn't listen

She nags

He doesn't listen

Is it that he does not listen because she nags or does she nag because he doesn't listen?
Yes.

You can break the loop by jumping in anywhere. Either person can make the first change of attitude to break the loop.

Paying attention to our method of communication is an ideal way to break the loop. The following can help:

1. Make "I" statements about your feelings and wants, rather than "you" statements about the other's behavior and motivations.
2. Avoid asking dishonest questions. A dishonest question is when you really want to communicate something rather than get an answer, i.e., "Why don't we ever do anything together?" when you really mean, "I'd really enjoy doing more things together." Questions that begin with "Why" are frequently dishonest questions.
3. Avoid the use of "always" and "never." These words usually signal blame and result in defensiveness and anger on the part of the other person.
4. Avoid answering with "Yes, but..."
5. When you are angry or irritated, tell the other person objectively and directly what is bothering you. Use "I" statements. Do not retreat into silence or use

non-verbal messages.

6. Choose the right time and place for initiating a serious discussion about problems.
7. Focus on the problems you are discussing. Do not bring up past grievances.
8. Reflect back to the other person what you hear him/her saying. This encourages each person to really listen to the other. It lets each of you know your message was received, and prevents distortion of messages. It slows down the exchange. It conveys acceptance of the other's feelings.
9. Work toward a compromise rather than trying to win a fight.
10. View disagreements as problems to be worked out rather than as situations in which blame must be established.
11. Avoid mind-reading. Do not try to guess what is on the other person's mind. Ask them what they are feeling.
12. Do not expect the other person to know what you are thinking or what you want. Tell them directly. Avoid saying to yourself, "If s/he really cared about me, s/he would know that I want..."
13. Avoid overlong statements. Try not to talk more than a minute or two before giving the other person a chance to respond. Overlong statements make reflection more difficult. They can also sound like lectures.
14. Avoid sarcasm.
15. Be aware of non-verbal communication. Such things as body posture, tone of voice, and eye contact are as important as the content of the message.