

Talking Team—Critical Dimensions that Increase Team Effectiveness

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Ophthalmology practices, by virtue of their operations, are organized around teams: administrative, technician, surgical, and physician. When groups of people work together, there is the possibility for effective, constructive outcomes, but also the chance that opposite, less desirable results will occur.

The dictionary definition of teamwork is clear and concise: "... joint action by a group of people." While this sounds simple, the implementation of great teamwork is not so simple.

Five dimensions that make a difference

To optimize teamwork, it is important to understand five dimensions that are critical in increasing team effectiveness.

1. Assumptions about culture. Before effective teamwork can be developed, certain assumptions need to be defined. The first, and perhaps the most important, is determining if the practice really wants a "team environment." If so, does the leadership embrace it, and is the concept of teamwork clearly articulated in, and driven by, the mission of the practice?

In recent years, the Oregon-based practice of Drs. Fine, Hoffman, and Sims found that cultivating a positive culture that allows for continuous change and improvement reinforces a team environment. Although creating a positive culture takes time and energy (and initially might

be costly), we believe that building an effective team culture has been paramount to the practice's success. Teamwork cannot flourish in a practice where the mission and culture do not support it.

2. Values. Team effectiveness is best achieved when there is a value placed on every person's contribution. In essence, everyone is viewed as an asset to the practice, regardless of function, salary, or experience level. A corollary: Teams create a synergy that increases efficiency.

In this second dimension, the practice values the collective wisdom of the team and implements policies and procedures that reinforce these values. The quote from the famous basketball coach, Phil Jackson, points to the importance of both the individual and the team: "The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team."

With assumptions and values as the foundation for team effectiveness, the real "test" of team effectiveness comes when people display behaviors that are conducive to team effectiveness.

3. Behaviors. Collaboration is an essential behavior if teams are to be successful. Many people educated in healthcare have learned to be competent, decisive, individual contributors. Indeed, these are important traits to possess. However, learning to collaborate demands other skills, including being willing to communicate effectively and often; dealing constructively with conflict; and helping others.

Teamwork "creators" (Figure 1) understand the behaviors required to create a collaborative environment. Teamwork "destroyers" (Figure 2), unfortunately, do not. You might ask yourself which kinds of individuals—teamwork creators or destroyers—proliferate in your work environment. You will quickly discern which list is beneficial to team effectiveness!

4. Team structure. Smoothly running practices, as well as smoothly functioning teams, have commonalities. Practices where everyone is on the same page are the most successful. This means, among other things, that everyone understands the goals and expectations, roles and responsibilities, of each team member in particular and the practice as a whole.

Most people respond well to structure in some degree, and teams are no exception. It is important that everyone on the team understands "who" does "what" by "when." Articulating the team's goals and having a plan to achieve them are the prescription for effectiveness. As Yogi Berra says, "If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up somewhere else."

Designating a team leader is also important. Some teams can function without a designated leader, but in many situations, leaderless teams are less productive, especially if there is lack of clarity about the team's goals or roles and responsibilities.

5. Accountability. No team can claim effectiveness unless there is a way to measure it. Establishing goals is key. Of

equal importance is the identification of outcome measures or metrics to determine if the team is meeting its goals.

It is essential to establish and communicate to team members the consequences for achieving or falling short of the outcomes. Understanding both the positive and negative consequences of the team's performance will motivate the team to problem solve in ways that will increase the team's productivity and effectiveness. It's necessary to allow adequate time for the team to review its performance and to revise the structure, goals, or roles to meet the demands and changes in the work environment. Also remember to provide time to celebrate the victories of the team. Having fun with the team is good medicine for team effectiveness!

Discovering dimensions that work for your practice

Perhaps you have identified one or more of the five dimensions that are

strong in your practice and others that need to be enhanced. Here are some questions you might consider asking yourself as you contemplate increasing team effectiveness:

- Which dimensions are in place in our practice that positively impact team effectiveness?
- Which dimensions need improving?
- How can we increase communication and collaboration among teams to ensure that employees are making good decisions, going the extra mile for the patients, and adding positive energy to our culture?
- Who are the drivers in our practice that can create a culture of continuous improvement and change to increase teamwork among our employees?

As you continue to build or improve team effectiveness in your practice, consider implementing the steps pictured in Figure 3.

Practices where team effectiveness is present reap many benefits. Patients and employees are happy. The workplace is less stressful, the staff experiences increased confidence, and the level of personal and professional satisfaction is high. **AE**



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Figure 1

TEAMWORK CREATORS

Communicate effectively
Respect other and their opinions
Empower other teammates
Act as facilitator vs. autocrat
Take time to resolve conflict
Offer ideas, but not offended if ideas are not used
Remember to give other teammates credit
Search ways to continuously improve teamwork

Figure 2

TEAMWORK DESTROYERS

Deny other teammates chance to fully participate
Engage in behaviors that create mis-trust
Strive for power and control
Take credit for other teammates' work
Refuse to help teammates, even if it benefits the teams
Oppose other's ideas regularly
Yelp, instead of help!
Express negativity—"glass half empty"
Resist changes team considers to be the best
Share little—information, skills, self

Figure 3

BUILD TEAMWORK WITH LASER-LIKE PRECISION

