

Improving Your Medical Office Management
By John P. Croce

Over the last several years, I have had the opportunity to work with a wide array of medical practices.

No matter what the practice size or specialty, improving office management and efficiency was frequently a desired goal of the physician partners during my assessment process.

How does a practice go about improving how it manages itself?

My recommendations typically address the following areas:

1. Governance
2. Structure And Available Personnel
3. Staff Mindset
 - ? ? Morale
 - ? ? Size
 - ? ? Compensation
 - ? ? Training
 - ? ? Room For Advancement
4. Communication

GOVERNANCE

Loosely defined, governance is the physician partners' opportunity to participate in the management of their business. Through committees, the physician partners create the policies from which their practice will be managed. I would recommend that the practice manager be included in this process as well. The physician partners subsequently "empower" the practice manager to implement these policies while continually monitoring the results.

A sole practitioner can also benefit by getting his or her business policies down on paper so that the practice manager has guidelines from which to manage the business.

STRUCTURE AND AVAILABLE PERSONNEL

Do you have an organization chart? Job descriptions for your staff?

No...don't panic. You don't have to be an MBA to do either. There are resources in bookstores or on the internet that can help you and your practice manager create effective organization charts and job descriptions. In addition, don't forget to get your staff's input! You can have them jot down their responsibilities as they come up each day over several days time (this is also a morale booster since it shows them that you value their input and are interested in what they do).

Once this is done, evaluate your staff and their roles based upon the job descriptions. How do they measure up? What and who are you missing?

STAFF MINDSET

Morale

Maintaining positive office morale is a most overlooked and yet most important management tool. Are your people walking around with their heads down (physicians included)? Are they smiling? Do they pitch in and offer to help without being asked to? Are staff and physicians arguing (in front of patients)? Why?

Your staff takes their “lead” from you. If you are upbeat, they will be also. SMILE! Say Hello and Good Night! Don’t be afraid to say thank you to them for their hard work and dedication. They **are** dedicated to you and your business or hadn’t you noticed?

When is the last time they had raises? Bonuses? Holiday parties or picnics?

Come to think of it, when did you last get a raise? While you think they may, your staff doesn’t understand that a physician owner is the last one to get paid. Your staff gets paid and you get what’s left, right? Is that amount constantly dwindling over the last few years due to reduced insurance fees, rising malpractice costs and other expenses? Is this affecting *your* attitude in the office?

Office morale is also impacted by office space. Is it cramped or well-planned? Clean? What impression does it give (to your patients)? Do you have satellite offices? Do the “main office” staff resent those working at a satellite office with more space and fewer patients to be seen?

A positive, upbeat office environment for your employees = Happy Patients!

Staff Size/Compensation

Look into some industry benchmarking for staff sizes and compensation. The most notable source is the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA). They offer relevant data compiled from medical practices by specialty. How about your medical association(s)? Any salary surveys available to the membership?

Training

Do you have “in-service” sessions for your clinical staff? Customer Service Training for all of your staff? Coding Training (physicians, billing staff and front desk)? Supervisory Training? Managerial Training? Continuing Education allowance for employee physicians and extenders?

A well-trained staff reflects positively upon you *in good times and bad!* Ask your patients! They know what they want and need.

Room For Advancement

Do you offer advancement to your staff? Can file clerks advance to a front desk or medical assistant position? Do you “promote from within” to fill supervisory roles? What’s the partnership track for your hard-working employee physicians?

COMMUNICATION

Communication is the lifeblood of any business in any industry. For you, do you have physician partner meetings? Provider meetings (include employee physicians and extenders)? Employee staff meetings? Meetings with your practice manager or administrator?

Yes---how often? No---why not? Despite opinions to the contrary, frequent meetings are essential and can be productive. In order to be so, there must be a written agenda and someone to keep it on track.

Don’t forget that your new organization chart is also a means of communication. It tells you who reports to whom, who is responsible for what and how decisions are made within your business.

If you have read this far and are unsure what you need to do, you can get help. An experienced consultant can not only develop an organizational structure for you but can help you in other critical areas as well. They often pay for themselves many times over with revenue enhancement ideas and cost-cutting suggestions.

Whatever you decide to do, *now* is the time to get started! Don’t be intimidated by the task at hand. If you need help, ask for it! Good Luck!