The secret weapon in highly effective team training

By Julie Parker

Team training is a wonderful way to consistently improve as a practice. Attending seminars and workshops provides learning opportunities to develop new skills and helps to align your team's understanding around the purpose of your practice.

However, despite learning the theory behind new concepts, many people find it difficult to convert this learning into action. When the opportunity arises, they instead can often fall back into their old behaviour.

The reason for this is that the old behaviour is what they know. It has been their usual, repeated behaviour for so long that it is firmly planted into their subconscious, automatic mind. It takes enormous mental energy to do anything different.

Our subconscious mind helps us by automating many of our repeated behaviours, so we don't have to overload our conscious minds with every little thing. Imagine your day if you had to be consciously aware of every action when walking, driving, typing, speaking, eating... you'd be exhausted by 10am!

To successfully adopt a new response or action, you need to work with the subconscious mind. An effective method to do this is ROLE-PLAYING.

Role-playing is when two or more people act out roles to explore various scenarios. An example for a dental practice situation is role-playing your practice's welcome of a new patient for their first visit. Team members play the roles of dentist, nurse, receptionist and patient. Other team members observe.

By acting out the new behaviour a few times, the experience becomes imprinted into your subconscious. The subconscious does not know the difference between a real or false memory. Despite merely acting the part, your subconscious processes the event as real. Next time the new behaviour is called upon, you will more effortlessly react in your chosen manner.

The reasons why role-playing is successful are similar to that of visualisation. Visualisation is creating mental imagery, or "mental rehearsal", of a desired experience. Repeating this mental rehearsal tells your subconscious that it is a repeated behaviour. You then have increased self-confidence and personal power when engaging in the experience in real life.

Another benefit from role-playing is that it provides the opportunity to establish the PROCESS of the new system.

To explain, imagine I ask you to bake me a pie. You go away to complete the task and return with a meat pie and sauce. However, I am annoyed. What I wanted was an apple pie and cream.

Imagine instead, that I not only ask for a baked pie, but also provide you with the list of ingredients. This will result in the right type of pie, however, if you have not baked before, it is likely it won't be a great result.

Now imagine that you have the recipe. With all the correct ingredients, measurements and processes, you have the best chance to bake a delicious pie.

Providing the recipe - or process - to your team gives them the best chance

to implement new systems. It is through role-playing that team members identify what items, scripts and space they need to streamline.

The thought of role-playing makes many people shudder. "I will seem foolish", "I am too shy", "I will be embarrassed." But this doesn't need to be the case. For this reason, role-plays should be kept light and humerous. Don't be too serious. Create the environment for the team to have fun with each other.

"Tell me and I forget,
teach me and I may remember,
involve me and I learn!"
Benjamin Franklin

Step-by-step guide to role playing

Select a scenario to role-play (for example, the new patient visit). Allocate staff members to each role (dentist, nurse, patient, receptionist). Each person gets 'into' their character and experiences the scenario through those eyes.

Role-players are looking for physical, communication and behavioural barriers to overcome so the real-life scenario flows smoothly.

Observers are looking for elements that don't seem right, or appear uncomfortable or unnatural for the roles. Observers are encouraged to make continual suggestions.

There will be constant interruption with everyone's thoughts and ideas. This is GOOD! This is the process of finessing the system.

Re-play sections of the role-play incorporating each team member's ideas until everyone is happy with the result.

Change around the role-players so everyone gets a chance to see things from a different perspective, including being the observer. We want every team member to benefit from role-playing.

Have a 'scribe' to make notes throughout so the chosen ideas, verbiage, physical surroundings and movements can be formalised into your finished system.

It is imperative to create a 'safe space' for your team when role-playing: Do not make it risky to participate, by being criticised or laughed at for doing the 'wrong' thing!

Suggested code of conduct

- Be respectful of each other at all times;
- Be encouraging and enthusiastic of each person's performances;
- Allow each other time to speak uninterrupted;
- Validate each other's input and ideas;
- Stick to the topic chosen for the role-play;
- Be supportive of staff members who are struggling by helping them feel less anxious; and
- Do not make anyone feel silly, offended or unduly pressured.

Role-playing can be a powerful learning technique in your personal life, as well as your working life. Use role-play and visualisation to become more confident in the application of any skill. It may be public speaking, socialising or speaking assertively. Rather than falling into the trap of focusing on how you struggle in these scenarios, imagine yourself being highly capable and enjoying them.

It is only through the repetition of actions, which is practice, that we can possibly become better.

About the author

Julie Parker's whole career has been devoted to the dental industry, starting in 1987 as a dental nurse. In 2003, Julie became the first non-dentist to buy a dental practice in Australia. She owned and managed her practice in Brighton, Victoria for 10 years. During this time, she more than trebled the turnover and her staff base grew from 3 to 12 members. Julie successfully cultivated a winning team and a winning business. Her business programs on how to accomplish a dream dental business are gleaned from her wealth of experience, intensive education and an inquisitive business mind. Julie is a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Time Line Therapy and Hypnotherapy.

Julie Parker Practice Success offers a subscription based program that educates all dental staff in the building and managing of their practices. Members receive monthly audio CD's and workbooks that lead them along the path to personal and team success. All team members, including the dentists, receive Certificates of Completion each month for submission for non-clinical CPD points and inclusion on resumes. Memberships are available for $395 per month. For more info, see www.julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au.