

PREMIUM PRACTICE

January 2010
Volume 1, No. 1

TODAY

The Importance of Practice Culture in the Premium Channel Environment

Establishing Core Values

Three Ways to Foster an Inviting Office Culture

"Premium Practice Today" is a new monthly section in CRSToday featuring articles on the important business aspects necessary to running a premium practice. In addition, monthly Webcasts and video products will support the related topics presented in these pages. "Premium Practice Today" will be a valuable educational resource for surgeons and their staff on fundamental ways to improve how they conduct business and increase the success of the premium services they offer.



For more online and interactive
Premium Practice Today content, visit
eyetube.net and click on webinars.

Section Editor: Shareef Mahdavi
Pleasanton, California

Editorial Advisors: Matt Jensen
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

James D. Dawes
Sarasota, Florida

The Importance of Practice Culture in the Premium Channel Environment

The character of the lead surgeon can color the entire organization, so it is the surgeon's responsibility to make the culture a positive one.

BY CONNI BERGMANN KOURY, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Every organization—even a physician's office—has a unique *culture*. According to an online article from the American Academy of Ophthalmology's Web site,¹ that culture determines how patients, staff, and doctors feel when they walk in the office. The practice owner or top surgeon plays the key role in determining the office culture. If he or she wants the office culture to be one of excellence, competence, and friendliness, then every member of the staff must work to set that tone, wrote Gregory S. Brinton, MD, MBA, a retina specialist in private practice in Salt Lake City and a member of the board of the American Academy of Ophthalmic Executives¹ (see *Three Ways to Foster an Inviting Office Culture*).

BUILDING THE CORE

At Vance Thompson Vision in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Dr. Thompson has assembled a team of physicians who all share the same core values (see *Vance Thompson Vision: the Team*).

According to Matt Jensen, director of Vance Thompson Vision and a certified Experience Economy expert, Dr. Thompson is very down to earth and humble, and he is attracted to other surgeons with similar qualities and a similar style.

"We all wake up every day and ask, how can we make



The Vance Thompson Vision team: surgeons, physicians, and staff.

VANCE THOMPSON VISION: THE TEAM



Vance Thompson, MD

Dr. Thompson is the director of refractive surgery for Sanford Clinic in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and serves as an assistant professor of ophthalmology at the Sanford USD School of Medicine. A leading international researcher in the field of laser vision correction, he has played a key role in developing the excimer laser for vision correction and has also served as a principal investigator in numerous FDA-monitored clinical trials studying the laser and implant vision correction of nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism.

Alison Tendler, MD

Dr. Tendler specializes in cataract and IOL implant surgery and refractive surgery to correct nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism. A member of the American Board of Ophthalmology, Dr. Tendler grew up in South Dakota—beginning in Clear Lake, then Sioux Falls. She earned her medical doctorate, graduating with honors, and completed her internship at the University of South Dakota School of Medicine. She continued her training with a 3-year ophthalmology residency at the University of Minnesota.



John Berdahl, MD

Dr. Berdahl specializes in advanced cataract, corneal, and glaucoma surgery, in addition to refractive surgery. He earned his medical doctorate, graduating with honors from Mayo Medical School in Rochester, Minnesota, and finished his internship at the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona. He completed his ophthalmology residency at Duke University where his published work, research, teaching, and care of patients brought him many honors, including best resident and national recognition as first-place winner of the Resident Writers Award. Dr. Berdahl pursued additional advanced surgical training at the most coveted cornea and glaucoma fellowship in the country at Minnesota Eye Consultants. As a fellow, he received the Claes Dohlman Award from Harvard University, which is given to the top cornea fellow in the country.

Doug Wallin, OD

Dr. Wallin grew up in the northwest Iowa town of Spirit Lake. He attended Iowa State University in Ames, where he was a member of the men's volleyball team and received his Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology in 1987. He was accepted at the University of Houston College of Optometry, where he received numerous clinical excellence awards. He was awarded the Overall Clinical Excellence Award of his graduating class when receiving his Doctor of Optometry in 1991. Dr. Wallin then completed a 1-year post-doctoral Advanced Clinical Residency in Refractive and Corneal Surgery Care at Houston Eye Clinic in Houston, Texas, under the direction of Stephen G. Slade, MD, and Richard Baker, OD.



Keith Rasmussen, OD

Dr. Rasmussen joined Vance Thompson Vision in July 2004 after spending the previous year with Eye Care Associates of Nevada in Reno. He is a member of the American Optometric Association, the South Dakota Optometric Society, and the Nevada Optometric Physicians Association. Dr. Rasmussen graduated with distinction from Pacific University College of Optometry in Forest Grove, Oregon, in 2003. He split the 2002-to-2003 school year between Tyndall Air Force Base Hospital in Tyndall, Florida, and the Salt Lake City Veterans Administration Medical Center, after spending May through August of 2002 at the Applewood Vision Clinic in Denver. Also active in the community during these years, he contributed his time and talents to such organizations as the Oregon School for the Blind and the Child Services Department in Portland. He completed a study titled "An Epidemiological Overview of Pediatric Visual Impairment in the State of Oregon" over the course of 2001 and 2002.

PREMIUM PRACTICE TODAY

FIVE CORE VALUES AT VANCE THOMPSON VISION

The Vance Thompson Vision refractive surgery team agreed to abide by a list of core values that represents unwritten or traditional rules among all physicians. This list of core values was based on the philosophy of many cutting-edge companies from other consumer-driven industries.

- (1) Our patients are our most important resource. They should be treated like guests and family visiting our home.
- (2) Each team member is empowered to look for ways to exceed the patient's expectations and enhance his or her experience at all times.
- (3) Each patient should experience our undivided attention. His or her preferred name should be used, he or she should be escorted at all times, and all attention should focus on him or her when he or she is present.
- (4) Team members should look at each patient encounter as an opportunity and privilege to affect his or her life in a positive way. Each patient should leave here feeling better than when he or she arrived.
- (5) Each team member should participate in a Cadence of Coverage that overcommunicates responsibilities and workflow so that we can best meet the needs of each other and our patients.

people happy?" Dr. Thompson said in an interview with *Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today*.

The character of the lead surgeon can color the entire organization, Mr. Jensen said, and it is that surgeon's responsibility to make the culture a positive one. "When patients and even employees leave the practice and are asked, 'How did that make you feel?' the answer to that question is the essence of office culture," Mr. Jensen said.

MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE

In the book, *Physician Success Secrets: How the Best Get Better*, Greg Korneluk wrote that 50% to 80% of what patients hear in the office is immediately forgotten and only 50% of their recall is correct.²

"We must realize that we can't count on anything to be remembered properly," Mr. Jensen said. That is why the cultural aspect of the premium practice is so important: we cannot rely on the patient's memory of experiences at the practice.

Use an airline flight as an example, Mr. Jensen said: "How much of the experience are you in control of? Can you tell someone how high you were flying or how long the safety instructions lasted? The flight was by and large unremarkable. But if an employee of the airline scolded you as you boarded the flight—that would taint the entire 5-hour experience. That's the memory that sticks with you."

A practice's corporate culture is important and facilitates the customer's experience because it hits people in the way that is most meaningful to them—how they feel.

At Vance Thompson Vision, one of the ways the Dr. Thompson reinforces the corporate culture and maintains that trickle-down effect is through proximity, Mr. Jensen said: "We choreograph our staff to be in front

of the entire team of physicians and myself at least 10 times more than the average practice. Most other practices have, at best, a monthly meeting. We meet on our core principles every morning, and every day the staff is interacting with the surgeons, and not only in the examining room."

"We call the team meeting our *holy huddle*, Dr. Thompson said. "We go over everything that could go wrong today, everything that went right yesterday. We go through the fumble analysis, and we close by telling the staff, 'You are the best.' You tell people that often enough, and they believe you."

GIVE THE STAFF AUTONOMY AND LET THEM KNOW THEY ARE VALUED

It is important that employees know and feel that they are valued members of the team and that they recognize how important their attitudes are to the practice's overall success. Articles are posted in the break room, and employees are required to sign off that they have read them. Dr. Thompson has a required reading list for his staff. Also key at Vance Thompson Vision, the staff is given the proper information so that employees can make informed decisions. The staff is authorized to give out such items as gas cards for a patient who had a long drive or a free lunch to recognize a patient who had a particularly long wait.

"There are things that must be done at that stage of the visit to make the patient's experience world class," Mr. Jensen said. They include what happens at the front desk. "We script everything from how the technician who first works up a patient interacts, the greeting, to the way they walk the patient down the hall," he said. "The staff needs to be talking to the patients about certain things during the encounter."

"We say, if no one were to show up to work today except you, are you going to make sure that these 50 or 100 patients have the exact same experience they would have had yesterday when everyone was here?" Mr. Jensen said. He emphasized that it is about standardizing processes and making sure that all of the details have been considered.

By the time the technician has performed several tests on

the patient, he or she has obtained much information. The technician weaves questions into the encounter, although he or she does not get into the technical aspects of the lens. The technician may say, "I am taking these measurements to help you and the doctor make that very important decision about which lens you will have—either regular lenses or the the special lenses we can provide to help reduce your

THREE WAYS TO FOSTER AN INVITING OFFICE CULTURE BY GREGORY S. BRINTON, MD, MBA

The following information was excerpted with permission from *YO Info*, the American Academy of Ophthalmology's newsletter for young ophthalmologists—those in training as well as in their first few years in practice.

No. 1. Say No to Negativity

When something goes wrong, we sometimes ask or search until we find out who is responsible so we can set them straight. This approach spreads fear throughout the office and people become hesitant to tackle difficult problems or make changes. Alternatively, clinicians should remind their staff that they are the best and assume the problem is in the process or the system, not the individual. Therefore the circumstances need to be changed. It is crucial that the principal's own attitude and behaviors are positive so that he or she can focus on and encourage staff members who foster positive attitudes.

No. 2. Promote Positivism

Kind words and personal attention from the physician can mean more to an employee than a raise, it has been shown. Negative words, however, become magnified in the minds and feelings of the staff. Things the physicians should try to convey to the staff in word and action include

- Thank you.
- We are all fortunate to be working in an ophthalmology office where our goal is to provide the best possible eye care for people.
- We all enjoy working in a practice that has the reputation of being thriving and successful.
- Honesty and fairness are always pursued without question in this office.

No. 3. The Three As (plus one E)

An effective office culture focuses on the "three A's" of a successful medical practice:

- Availability. We want to make sure we are always available to our patients and referring physicians. Answer the phones quickly. Always know how to get our doctors on the phone immediately if necessary. Always have room for emergency appointments. A culture of availability is necessary to thrive in today's competitive world.
- Affability. Always be kind to everyone. Remember that, for some people, the severe eye problem that brought them to our practice is the worst thing that has ever happened to them in their life.
- Ability: We need to remind our staff that we have the best doctors and the best staff.
- Efficiency: In these times of increasing overhead and declining reimbursement, we need to establish a culture of efficiency.

It is often said that any institution is the lengthened shadow of its leader. As physicians, we automatically become the leaders in our practice. We lead by setting the proper tone or culture in our office. Patients and staff correctly and intuitively know that they can best understand our quality as a physician and a person by looking at the culture in our office.

Gregory S. Brinton, MD, MBA, is a retina specialist in private practice with Retina Associates of Utah, PC, in Salt Lake City and a member of the board of the American Academy of Ophthalmic Executives. Dr. Brinton may be reached at (801) 312-2020; greg.brinton@m.cc.utah.edu.

PREMIUM PRACTICE TODAY

dependence on contacts, glasses, and reading glasses after surgery."

It is good business. The seed has been planted, and when the patient sees the doctor, then he finally talks about the lens in detail and explains what is best for the patient. By this time, the patient has heard different portions of the IOL story four or five times, Mr. Jensen said.

SECRET INTELLIGENCE

At the same time, the staff can also be capturing "secret intelligence" about the patient. For example, maybe the patient told the technician that he reads very small notes of music because he is a music teacher, although the technician notes that the chart shows that the patient is a wrestling coach

"This information about the patient is captured. When the doctor comes in and sees this on the chart, he can ask about it," Mr. Jensen said. Now the patient feels special, he feels different, and it gives him an overall positive experience.

Another way Vance Thompson Vision keeps consistency in the office is by scheduling all of the new patients on Monday. Certainly, new patients are seen during the entire week, but on Monday's it is all new patients.

"This allows us to have a script," Mr. Jensen explained. "Everyone we see, that is not a staff member, we can say, 'Welcome to Vance Thompson Vision. This must be your first time here.' And the patient thinks, wow, they must know every patient! The rest of the week, patients are scheduled in blocks. For example, if its 11 a.m. on Wednesday, I know these are continuing patients, and I can say, 'Welcome back to Vance Thompson Vision.' The importance of these little things cannot be overlooked."

LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

No practice is perfect. Dr. Thompson said, "Of course everybody blows it. And then we say OK, how did we blow that one, and how can we standardize it for next time? We define how that should work."

One of the core values of the team, according to Dr. Thompson (see *Five Core Values at Vance Thompson Vision*) is that everyone has the responsibility to resolve customer's concerns before they leave. "Our staff has the autonomy to make people happy. If the situation is a medical one, then the staff finds a physician to make sure the patient has their concerns addressed and does not leave upset," he said.

All of these steps and attention to personal service result in better patient care, better awareness, and better

success with premium channel services, Dr. Thompson said. The patients feel valued, and the employees feel good about delivering higher-quality medical services. As a result, the office culture is valued.

Dr. Thompson noted that all team members sign the Declaration of Core Values so that the entire organization has ownership of the philosophy. The group also believes that rules do not change, they grow. "We believe it is important for surgeons and office managers to realize that, just as the refractive surgery market changes, core values evolve. We review our list on an annual basis during an off-site retreat with our entire staff. Each person voices his opinion on each core value and helps decide on necessary updates, eliminations, etc. We really want to hear from all employees because it will affect the work they do in their job function," Dr. Thompson said.

Shareef Mahdavi, president of SM2 Consulting in Pleasanton, California, said in an interview with EyetubeTV (www.eyetube.net) that a great experience for the patient begins with a great team. "I am a firm believer in hiring for attitude," he said. "You can teach a skill, as far as how to do a patient's workup or counseling, but you can't teach attitude. Patients need to feel that the individual would do anything to help or service their needs. I tell clients, if your employees are not on the A team, they need to be off the team."

It is important to recruit people willing to embrace the center's core values and to be upfront about what the physicians are trying to achieve, Dr. Thompson emphasized.

"One of our philosophies is to recruit talented individuals who naturally adhere to these core values, because those characteristics—unlike a knowledge of ophthalmology—are difficult to teach," Dr. Thompson said. "The key is to provide a working environment that nurtures these core values. The benefit of defining our team's core values is that it gets everyone moving in the same direction, but, more importantly, it puts premium patient care where it belongs—at the point of service." ■

Matt Jensen is the director of Vance Thompson Vision in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Mr. Jensen may be reached at (605) 328-3903; jensenmp@sanfordhealth.org.



1. Young Ophthalmologists. Three ways to foster an inviting office culture.

<http://www.aao.org/yo/newsletter/200902/article02.cfm>. Accessed December 17, 2009.]

2. Korneluk G. *Physician Success Secrets: How the Best Get Better*. Boca Raton, FL: International Council for Quality Care; 2004.