

HOW CONSULTANTS CAN IMPROVE A PRACTICE

Select an expert who can offer solutions and execute a desirable plan.

BY DAWN THOMPSON AND AMY JACOBS



As patients' expectations rise and health care continues to change, ensuring that your practice is providing the highest standard of care will take more time, energy, and focus. Those who succeed in this area will say that change

is constant in their practices; they are always assessing what new program or improvement is delivering the best results.

Making changes in your practice can be daunting. It often requires seeking an outsider who will bring a fresh perspective to assess your business operations and your practice's full potential.

PREPARE FIRST

Consultants, specialists, advisors—whatever you want to call them—may be able to provide your practice with the support it needs to embark on a new initiative, process, or experience for patients that will help differentiate your business and meet today's demands. If you feel that it is time to widen your net and get some outside assistance, you will first need to take some important steps to maximize the experience.

No. 1. Understand the true definition of a consultant

Consultant is a noun that means a person who provides expert advice professionally. There is a profound difference between a person who can identify problems and a person who can provide solutions. You should feel confident that the consultant you select will be Assessing, Identifying, and Delivering the AID your practice needs to succeed. Telling you what needs improvement will not necessarily help unless there is also a plan on how to implement the suggested improvements.

No. 2. Take a close look at your practice

It is difficult to see trouble spots when you are submerged in them daily. Ask your staff members for their honest, anonymous opinions, quickly survey your patients, and then carefully think about the comments with an open mind. There are no wrong answers, and this exercise will allow you to enter into the mindset for successful practice improvement.

No. 3. Know the expertise and services offered by your consultant

There are many different types of consultants available, so you will need to determine the primary areas on which you want a consultant to focus. Areas for improvement can include general business operations, clinical workflow, patient processes, staff training and maintenance of professional skills, coaching, and career development.

No. 4. Establish expectations and goals with your consultant

What is your return on investment? Determine in advance your areas of focus, what types of activities will be executed, and how success will be measured. Practice improvement will greatly affect your patients and your staff, and you will play an important role in establishing its priority, encouraging it by example, and supporting it in your attitude and budget. The truth is that, if improving a practice is not a priority for the physicians who own the practice, then it will not be a priority for anyone who works there.

No. 5. Identify what is in it for your staff

Improving your practice without the support of your staff is almost impossible. Helping them understand how the changes benefit them will greatly improve the integration and acceptance of new policies and processes. Key areas for staff members include employee retention, morale, practice efficiency, job competency, and patients' satisfaction. By providing support and resources to help staff members excel in these fundamental areas, you will see satisfaction spread from employees to patients and, ultimately, to you, the physician.

SELECT A CONSULTANT SECOND

Once you have prepared your practice, it is time to think about the qualities of an effective practice consultant. This person is an expert in his or her field who has extensive experience, ideally with either ophthalmic or elective practices. When looking for a consultant, seek an expert but also someone willing to roll up his or her sleeves and spend quality time at your practice. Find someone dedicated to learning what makes your practice unique; this person should also be interested in getting to know your team. Look for someone who is



willing and able to collaborate with you and your staff.

After spending time in your practice, a good consultant should:

No. 1. Ask the tough questions

You want to work with someone who is not afraid to ask intimate questions about your practice's finances and goals as well as the staff's concerns. If you are not comfortable divulging these answers to the consultant, then he or she might not be the right fit. Trust is a key element in an effective consulting relationship.

No. 2. Clearly define and communicate problems in your practice

A good consultant will pinpoint problems and cite specific examples. You want someone who can clearly communicate problems without sugarcoating them or telling you what you want to hear. Delivering negative feedback can bring anxiety to both parties, so it is important to find someone with whom you can comfortably engage in a direct dialogue.

No. 3. Create an action plan

As discussed earlier, you want more than a list of problems; you need a consultant who can provide an action plan that not only has specific goals but also sets clear timelines for hitting important benchmarks. Before you select a consultant, ask to see some examples of plans he or she has implemented in the past as well as the results of those plans.

No. 4. Determine who will be involved

Not only will a good consultant know how to put a plan in place, but he or she will also be able to identify and assign the right team members to execute the plan.

No. 5. Agree to move forward with the plan

A plan is only effective if it is implemented in your practice. Too often, consulting relationships fail at this stage. You must be committed to change and dedicated to following the recommendations upon which you agreed. Most consultants are willing to come to a financial agreement that rewards both parties on the growth associated with the implementation of a specific improvement plan.

CONCLUSION

A consultant who is a good fit for your practice will bring the desired value associated with improving efficiencies, raising morale, and ultimately growing your bottom line. Selecting the right individual for your practice's specific needs is the first critical step toward achieving the improvements you are seeking. ■

Amy Jacobs

- vice president of Sandbox Strategic
- ajacobs@sandboxstrategic.com

Dawn Thompson

- president of Sandbox Strategic
- dthompson@sandboxstrategic.com