



TEAM-CENTRIC PHILOSOPHY IS THE FOUNDATION OF WORLD-CLASS PRACTICE

Want to be world-class to your patients? Be world-class to your staff.

BY ROCHELLE NATALONI, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



Distilling a leading ophthalmic surgery practice down to its essence to identify the elements responsible for its winning ways is a little like performing a differential diagnosis. After ruling out several possibilities, it appears that the continuing growth and success of Vance Thompson Vision is a byproduct of the practice's team-first philosophy.

Happy and engaged employees stimulate a trickle-down effect that results in a flood of happy patients and referrals, and a good-neighbor reputation that courses through the community and beyond.

This neighborhood just happens to be the home of Vance Thompson, MD, an internationally recognized anterior segment surgeon who has been at the forefront of corneal and refractive surgery research, development, and innovation, including playing a pivotal role in many key clinical trials. Today, the practice boasts four surgeons, five optometrists, a clinical trials research department, and more than 100 employees—though Dr. Thompson says he prefers to refer to the staff as *teammates* or *work family*.

Dr. Thompson's skills and reputation would inarguably have been sufficient to maintain a successful ophthalmic surgery practice, but he has taken the practice way beyond that by infusing it with his own effervescence. If his practice were a question, it would be, "Why just provide exemplary eye care when we can also make the lives of everyone who comes in contact with the practice a little brighter and a little better?"



Vance Thompson, MD

SECRETS TO GROWTH

The multispecialty practice has seen 10% to 15% growth over the past year in laser vision correction, and perhaps even more notably, it has seen a 220% rise in cataract procedures in the past 4 years. CEO Matt Jensen attributes it to Dr. Thompson being an "all-around decent human being." Mr. Jensen says, "When you treat people properly, they want to be around that environment; that goes for staff and patients."

Dr. Thompson says the reason for the growth has been the amazing doctors and work family alongside whom he delivers care: "We deeply care about each other and each other's opinions. We are caring listeners. I work with some great thinkers and leaders and am honored to be a part of this work family. It is a joy to be the big brother of this organization, but I should give way more credit to my fellow doctors and team than to myself. They are amazing."

MARKETING EFFORTS

Before joining the Vance Thompson Vision team, Mr. Jensen worked with Dr. Thompson on marketing and communications efforts, among them defining and refining the practice's brand. "I will never forget the day, at 24 years of age, with no experience in leading a medical practice, that Vance said he saw something special in me and wanted to have me lead his practice," Mr. Jensen says. "He literally said he wanted to work for me. So, I joined him. Seeing greatness in others and creating an environment for that person's special greatness to shine have been a hallmark of our practice."

Now as CEO, Mr. Jensen helps harness Dr. Thompson's talent for nurturing and developing loyal employees. He's been instrumental in guiding the tremendous growth of this practice, which is now branching out to a second facility in Fargo, North

Dakota. He says Dr. Thompson's excellence with respect to his contributions to the corneal and lenticular refractive arena are the "entry fee" to the winner's circle but that it is his ability to inspire and bring out the best in the team that distinguishes the practice from equally excellent contenders.

Herein, Dr. Thompson and Mr. Jensen talk about the heart of Vance Thompson Vision and what makes it tick.

CRST: How did Vance Thompson Vision evolve into the leader that it is today?

Matt Jensen: Early in his career, Dr. Thompson saw a shift happening in the marketplace when health care was becoming more consumer-driven. Patients were acting a lot like customers, and he had keen insight into that because of his exposure to LASIK and the LASIK trials. He recognized that traditional health care was missing the boat in its interactions with patients. He saw the writing on the wall and realized that he needed to reposition his business to prepare for the onslaught of this consumer demand in the health care space.

CRST: What makes your practice a winner?

Vance Thompson, MD: Our practice has a basic belief that there is greatness in all people, and it is our mission to create an environment that allows that greatness to show itself. Often, we

hear from patients, "Where do you find all these great people?" The answer is that they are indeed great, but it is the environment the team creates that brings the greatness out of each other. Our philosophy is that the team comes first. Naturally, we are going to always do the right thing for a patient in need—we have taken a sacred oath to do our best for each patient—and in the process, we are going to use the world's best technologies and techniques to deliver care in the best way possible. It is our team, however, that creates the experience for themselves that ultimately creates an environment that maximizes the patient's experience.

When a team member truly feels that he or she is a valued person in a work family, it creates an environment where patients take notice and not only trust their care to you and your team, but they also tell their friends. The word of mouth this type of high-touch high-feel medical/surgical environment creates becomes a significant part of the practice's marketing because of the authenticity a team-driven patient experience creates. That is our key to success: the power of a work family that enjoys working together is our true differentiator.

CRST: Can you point out something specific that has played a part in the practice's success?

Mr. Jensen: It is all about the team. We have a culture that



is second to none. We have an extremely high loyalty amongst our team members. We have long said that we are not necessarily customer-centric; we are team-centric first.

One important way that we maintain team spirit is by having a staff meeting every morning. We call it our “holy huddle.” We talk about some of the fundamentals of our operations, including patient flow; we talk about things that need tweaking so we can improve the customer experience; we celebrate ways that we wowed a patient by going above and beyond; we discuss patients who we anticipate may be dissatisfied; and we talk about ways we can ensure that they have a great experience. We are essentially doing fumble analysis in front of the whole team. It is only 8 minutes long, but it is an important 8 minutes.

We have been constantly on a quest to improve the customer experience, and we subscribe to the narrative of the experience economy, which stresses that goods and services are no longer sufficient to attain client satisfaction; business and health care providers must step up and provide atmosphere and staff that can facilitate a positive experience.¹

CRST: Can you describe a challenge that the practice has successfully surmounted and how?

Dr. Thompson: We have grown to a team of over 100 people, and it has led to communication issues that were easier

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—Vance Thompson, MD

to address when we were a small team. We decided to implement what is called a high-performance management system (HPMS). In HPMS, a lot of work is put into current state analysis to examine what is currently going well and what is not going so well. After identifying those issues, the next step in HPMS is to define the dream state, which is how it would be if everything were going perfectly. The third step is to perform a gap analysis, which is creating a work list to take us from the current state to the dream state. This list becomes fairly long when you are truly committed to organizational excellence. Thus, prioritization needs to happen, and we did that by voting on what the most important issues we needed to work on were.

The top three ended up being team communications, referring doctor communications (and the process or ease of working with us), and finally, patients' wait times. We broke into three groups that began to work hard on these three areas. It has led to improvement in all three areas. Implementing a system like HPMS to deal with some of the issues has been both a challenge and a success because of the team's pulling together on these initiatives.

CRST: Tell me something about you that brings out the best in your practice.

Dr. Thompson: I have a deep commitment to pursuing excellence in technology. I passionately value developing and optimizing technology and techniques. When I am asked to be involved in the research and development of technologies that will change the way we deliver medical and surgical care, I put my whole heart into it. Along those lines, I value knowing when to transition to a new technique or technology for delivery to our patients. When new technology is developed, and I hear others talk about all the barriers to adoption, I do not necessarily see those same things as barriers. I feel comfortable navigating a path to acquire and deliver to my patients the world's best technology.

CRST: What are some ways that the staff has wowed patients?

Mr. Jensen: In our organization, everyone knows that they have \$200 to spend at any given time to blow someone's mind—and that includes patients and colleagues. This can range from giving cards for a job well done to forgiving a bill for a patient who has a complaint, to paying for a hotel for a patient who has to stay overnight. It can be something as simple as going out to get Starbucks or lunch for a patient who has had a lengthy wait to whatever it takes to ensure a positive experience. The staff goes to all kinds of lengths to surprise and delight people, because the goal is that no one should leave the building bummed out. Some months, we only spend \$600: that is an incredible return on experience or ROE. People always talk about return on investment; we prefer to focus on ROE. We want the customers to feel that they have been fussed over, and we want the employees to feel buoyed by the opportunity to make someone's day.

CRST: What is the greatest personal risk you have taken as you have built your practice and professional reputation?

Dr. Thompson: The biggest risk I have taken along my journey is on people. Believing in others has been the greatest risk I have taken, but it has also returned the greatest reward. Among the qualities that I have been blessed with are that I care very much about others and I see with clarity their greatness. I have not been a big believer in waiting to ask people to join me based on a need, but rather I have asked them to join

me based on knowing that they would make me and our team better.

This is the foundation of my career: a deep belief in people and a joy in team building along with a desire to be a great team member helping with whatever the task is at hand. As a matter of fact, I believe in the team so much that I am willing to be a follower or a leader, whichever is best for the team at that moment in time, whichever optimizes the team's goal.

CRST: You have described Vance Thompson Vision as a "good neighbor." What does that mean?

Mr. Jensen: We take part in community activities, and this invariably generates positive buzz in the community. People associate our positive energy with the practice name. For instance, we took part in a "holidazzle" parade of lights on Black Friday in our downtown area. There were tens of thousands of spectators lining the streets, and some of our team danced down the street wearing lit-up costumes, while others rode on a lit-up float that looked like our building. We won Best in Show. Forty

 WATCH IT NOW

Vance Thompson Vision participates in the "holidazzle" parade of lights on Black Friday.



The practice's staff performed a lip-synched video throughout the building.



people from our team rehearsed for a few weeks, went out on a Friday night, and came back with a trophy. The following Monday, we got 20 applications from people seeking employment. The staff enjoys the events, and the community has a chance to see our team spirit.

Something like that gets posted to Facebook, and we get 10,000 hits. We have just shy of 7,000 people following us on Facebook, and we have attained that by not talking about what Vance Thompson Vision offers. The things that spread like wildfire are when we are just yukking it up with our team. For instance, one day we closed down the business a little early, and we turned up all the speakers in our new building, played a fun song, and performed a lip-synched video throughout the building. We never mentioned the word *LASIK* or *glaucoma* or *cataract*, but it was probably one of our most successful marketing efforts, because it was shared so widely.

CRST: What are some ways that you build team spirit?

Mr. Jensen: One of our doctors came up with a great idea a couple of years ago that what we want for Christmas every year is just more time together as a team outside of the workplace. So once a month, we do something fun as a

work family. Next on the schedule is a day at a rodeo. We provide transportation, and everyone's family is invited. We will rent out a snowtubing park in the winter or a water park in the summer; sometimes it is just a social at a neighborhood sports bar. It is just a way for us to say that we believe so much in the team that we want to spend time with them and get to know them and their family outside of work. We try to create experiences all the time for our team so that they can be inspired and turn around and create positive experiences for our patients. Is it expensive to stage these experiences? Sure, but keeping employees happy and engaged is a bargain compared to hiring and retraining employees. We wholeheartedly believe that you cannot be world-class to your patients or customers unless you are world-class to work for. ■

1. Pine BJ, Gilmore JH. Welcome to the experience economy. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/1998/07/welcome-to-the-experience-economy>. Accessed July 18, 2016.

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