

Maximising Professional and Patient Relationships, and the Art of Building Great Teams

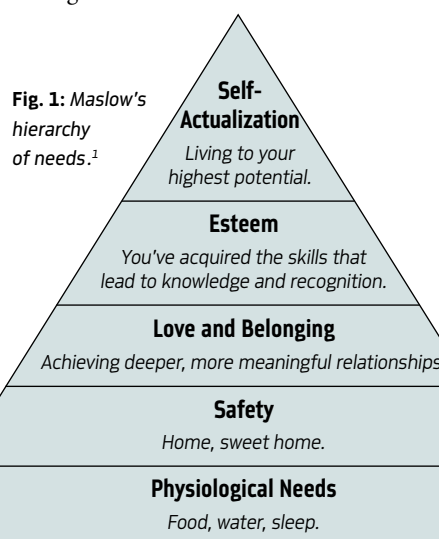


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I'm a dental student, not an expert in the fields of relationships, but because of the many opportunities and endeavors I've been involved with, I believe I've built an understanding of the characteristics needed to build great teams and maintain relationships in personal and professional settings.

Having practical and clinical skills alone is no longer a recipe for success. In our evolving profession, dentists with excellent additional communication skills stand out in a competitive market and are more likely to be in greater demand or successful practitioners. These skills include financial, stress management, teamwork and leadership and selling.

The staff at a dental practice is fundamental to its smooth day-to-day running. There are several types of arrangement that staff can have, most common of which is a salaried post. Dentists can also engage in associate, cost-splitting or profit-splitting partnership deals with other dentists or dental care professionals. The most successful dentists have a cloud of expertise that they can rely on to gain valuable information on demand.



How do you create and manage great teams?

In any profession, the most important way to manage a good team is through your own qualities as a leader.

You must motivate and inspire staffers to want to progress and become masters of their chosen skills. You must also be flexible, because dentistry presents many challenges you must adapt to. You must have a vision of the type of team you wish to lead and the goal you wish to collectively achieve, and you must also be able to effectively delegate by analysing and identifying the strengths of your colleagues and giving them responsibilities and roles that are skill-dependent.

Scheduling regular team meetings helps air and resolve disagreements and problems. This, in turn, helps retain team members and maintain an excellent working group.

Our main motivational factors

1. Financial benefits, such as bonuses for great work.
2. Social factors, such as having inter-professional relationships and feeling part of a larger cause
3. Having interest and enthusiasm about the role you carry out.

Motivation can be summarised by two well-documented models that highlight how motivation is the result of needs and wants being satisfied.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Fig. 1) posits that throughout life, people work their way up the pyramid and progress is disrupted if one part cannot be attained. Our most vital needs appear at the base and as we work up, we begin to achieve luxuries.

The major criticism of Maslow's model is that some people may, in reality, achieve higher positions of the pyramid before they achieve the lower parts, which goes against the definition of the theory.

Herzberg's hygiene and motivational model (Fig. 2) posits that there are two types of factors: *extrinsic*, which encourage survival, and *intrinsic*, which encourage professional progress. Relating this to dentistry, for a dentist to consider working in a practice, it must have a clean environment, good equipment and lighting, good financial incentives and stability. To motivate the dentist to work harder, he or she must be provided opportunities to train and progress.

Both models have weaknesses associated with them, and neither can comprehensively explain why and how humans get motivated.

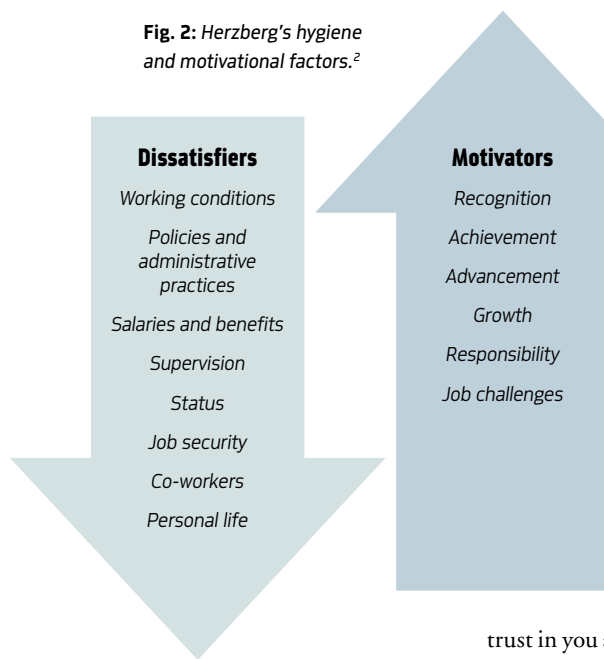
Getting the best possible team

To have a great team, you must recruit the right people.

All interviews are two-way processes; they allow employers to gain an appreciation about whether candidates are right for the position, and provide candidates with the opportunity to see if the role is what they're looking for. Because the team members are arguably the greatest asset of a dental practice, employers should look for people who are committed to their organisations and want to progress within the hierarchical business structure.

You must offer team members a fair salary; higher rates are more likely to increase motivation, which can affect output levels. More-qualified professionals will demand higher wages, so you must have a competitive wage to retain the best talent in your practice.

Fig. 2: Herzberg's hygiene and motivational factors.²



Maximizing the doctor/patient relationship

Patients form the backbone of a dental practice; without them, there is no income. Therefore, we must provide great quality of care and value.

Part of quality of care is having a mutual trust with the patients, to the extent where they have confidence and

trust in you as their dental professional. The secret to keeping a practice running in the long term is to build and maintain relationships with every one of your patient—and the tool is using your communication skills.

I categorize communications into:

- **Verbal:** speech and noises.
- **Nonverbal:** body language and eye contact.
- **Written:** direct messages and letters to patients.

Our aims in improving our relationships with patients are to reduce the stress they experience; to improve compliance with our recommendations and advice; and to reduce the number of complaints that they make against us. The latter has become particularly important recently, because today's patients do not hesitate to take health care professionals to court if they feel they've been wronged.

Some methods you can use to improve your dentist/patient relationships:

- Listen carefully to what patients have to say, and indicate that you're actively listening and are interested in what's being said by nodding and using small 'approval' noises.
- Keep the language simple. We've had rigorous dental training, but using jargon when talking to patients will only confuse them.

- When speaking to patients, give them your complete attention. Don't engage in other duties at the same time, such as typing on a computer or otherwise multitasking.
- Be supportive and nonjudgmental.
- Ask open-ended questions—ones that can't be answered with a mere 'yes' or 'no'—to get patients to expand on their answers. Asking closed-ended questions will lead to little rapport between you and your patients.
- Never speak while your back is turned away from a patient, and don't speak to patients while you're looking down at them—it can be perceived as threatening if you're looming overhead.
- Don't interrupt patients when they're talking or answering your questions.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Use appropriate body language.
- Speak slowly and stay calm.
- Never rush patients for answers.
- Ask personal questions to show patients that you are interested in them, not just their teeth.
- Try to remember big life events that your patients experience—having a baby, for example, or getting married. This will demonstrate your caring nature.
- Maintain space between yourself and your patients during conversations.

I hope that by implementing these methods you begin to reap the rewards of better patient relationships, which help you to stand out the crowd. It can be challenging but will also be rewarding—and remember these are some tricky skills to master, so keep at it and your communication techniques will develop over time. ■

Resources:

- *UNITY: a question of happiness*, <http://www.unity.org/publications/unity-magazine/articles/question-happiness> (figure 1)
- *NW: Herzberg's Hygiene and Motivational Factors*, <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/history/herzberg.html> (figure 2)

Team members in a dental practice will always be looking for training support and professional progress opportunities. You can train your members through providing practical hands-on sessions, by suggesting books and journals for them to read and engage in self-directed education, or by hosting lecture-based seminars. All of these improve their skill set and knowledge, allowing them to become better at what they do.

Reinforce the need to set, monitor and review 'SMART goals': specific, measurable, achievable, reviewable, time-sensible aims. When they meet these goals, you must appraise them. Very often in the professional environment, we give feedback only on what is not done well; we must remember to also give positive feedback when it's deserved, because it boosts the team member, who will work harder to receive more appraisals.

Having a practice management handbook is a good way of ensuring that each team member knows vital details regarding their role in the practice—employment conditions, duties and tasks, clinical processes, health and safety practices, and behaviour expectations, for example. Providing this is a great way of ensuring no misunderstanding or disagreements occur.