

# Better Communications for Better Workplaces



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Communications within the dental office are subject to many of the same challenges and risks as communications in any relationship. Human beings have limitless capacity to misinterpret, misinform and become emotional when an important issue requires discussion. What's said, is often not what's interpreted, and this can result in tension, increased miscommunication and ultimately, an unhappy work environment.

Read the following statements aloud, on your own or with your team, and rate yourself on a scale of 1-5, with five being the highest on what the *temperature* of your office is:

1. I take the time to get to know my colleagues in the dental office. I know them as people first and their clinical role second.
2. I feel there is trust between individuals in the dental office. We have each other's backs in difficult situations.
3. I think our office has a fair and inclusive approach to everyone and their ideas.
4. I take the time to listen to my colleagues and understand where they are coming from, even when it seems we may be on opposite sides of the fence.
5. I always acknowledge when my team, or my colleagues, do a great job. I let them know that I value them.

## Results

- 1-5:** Uh oh! Time for some team-building activities and Communication CE!
- 6-10:** There's definitely room for improvement here: set some team goals at your next staff meeting to improve communication.
- 11-15:** You're on your way to a great office, keep building!
- 16-20:** Communication is clearly a priority in your office, don't stop now!
- 21-25:** Your office culture is stellar! Your staff and patients are winning every time!

Everyone has good intentions, but our workplaces are busy and challenging and it's not uncommon to push interpersonal relationships between team members to the bottom of the *to-do* list as we struggle to meet patient expectations. However, office culture is **everyone's** responsibility on the dental team. Each of us has the potential to make or break a great office environment, and the leadership team is responsible for setting the tone of their office culture.

## Scenario: Billing Practices

A dentist notices that one of the new dental hygienists' (DH) billings seems to be lower than the other DHs in the practice. After reviewing the DHs notes, they realized that the DH is only accounting for actual debridement time with the scaling code. Their notes account for 10 minutes of medical history evaluation & documentation and 42 minutes debridement, including scaling and root planing. The dentist asked the front desk to change the billing to 3.5 units of scaling rather than 2.5 units. While they intended to talk to the DH at the end of the day, they forgot and went home without discussing it with the DH. The next morning, the DH notices the change and confronts the receptionist, who tells her that it was the dentist who told her to change the billing. The DH is noticeably upset.

Before opening a discussion between you and your team member, pre-work may be required to mitigate hurt feelings. This includes creating relationships, demonstrating appreciation, having conversations ahead of time – like what's included as scaling when the DH is hired as part of the onboarding, creating a safe and inclusive culture so that difficult conversations can be had, and finally, having conversations.

Everyone wants a workplace that they look forward to being at. Sometimes we forget that a great workplace is every team member's responsibility. Take a deep breath, give yourself time to calm your emotions. Don't take it personally, and don't make assumptions.

## For the Dentist

- Remember billing is tricky, and a new DH may not know that included in scaling time is: updating medical history, administering anesthetic, periodontal evaluation and recording of this information (e.g., probing, recession, BOP, furcations, mobilities, etc.), patient care documentation and chart review (so long as patient is present in the operatory) and time spent explaining the current proposed treatment.
- Reflect on your office's billing practices and ensure that your billing is fair and ethical; you want your DH to see that it is, agree, and be able to explain billing easily to patients.
- Take the time to involve the DH providing treatment in a conversation about their billing; and if needed, have them adjust their billing accordingly.
- Remind yourself that the conversation you had intended to have at the end of the previous day would have saved you some of this tension, and consider what system you need to put in place so key information is easily and quickly passed on to team members.

## For the Dental Hygienist

- Remember billing is tricky, familiarize yourself with correct billing by reviewing the preambles in the BC Dental Association (BCDA) *Suggested Fee Guide*. These will help you understand fair and ethical billing.
- Remind yourself that billing is also the purview of the dental practice owner, and so each provider, including the practice

owner, has a responsibility to ensure proper billing has occurred.

- Make sure you ask questions and understand appropriate billing practices so you can properly explain appointment billing to patients.
- If you cannot agree in principle, continue to respectfully discuss your issues until you are satisfied with the answers and comfortable in your job.

## For Everyone

- If you need support, BC Dental Hygienists' Association and BCDA Practice Advisors can help provide knowledge and resources to help you navigate tricky situations like these. Feel free to reach out to your association for assistance when you need it.

Please note the scenario above is fictional and the dentist/hygienist roles can be interchanged – we all make assumptions and take things personally and our first goal is to train ourselves not to do that! ■

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Since early 2021, Dr. Salima Dadani, Director, Member Support at BCDA and Shannon Wilson (DHP), Practice and Education Manager, BCDHA have met weekly to collaborate, discuss shared professional issues and consider how to advance oral health in BC. One area discussed frequently is how to support members in overcoming misunderstandings in the dental office. This article is the first in a series as they explore the future as leaders in oral health.



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