

Seven Habits of Highly Effective Optometrists

Perhaps the biggest misperception that young optometrists have about their profession is that they can succeed solely by developing and applying the clinical skills they learned in the classroom without paying much attention to human relations and business skills. However, people in every successful service business soon find that non-technical skills are just as critical to their success.

How young optometrists come to perceive their role, set their priorities and spend their time will shape their professional destiny. Here are seven habits of elite optometrists, highly effective professionals who are financially successful.

1. Patient-centrism

Middle-of-the-road optometric practices are organized to produce good clinical outcomes in an efficient way and to generate a profit. While these practice-focused goals are important, they overlook an equally essential practice goal embraced by elite practices — maximizing patient satisfaction.

Most business managers, including optometric practice owners, give lots of lip service to the importance of customer or patient satisfaction. But all too often, other priorities like profits and expense control actually drive daily activities and employee rewards. Most optometrists are convinced that their offices are patient-centric and that the service they offer is above average. But in reality few achieve much more than a mediocre level of service. Most offices settle into a comfortable routine that is convenient for the doctor and staff and that relegates patient needs and desires to secondary concerns.

It's only human nature for optometrists to unconsciously put personal goals and needs ahead of patient desires. Many O.D.s assume that showing up at work every day and applying their technical knowledge to help patients see better is doing enough to earn a comfortable living. They assume that their job begins and ends with providing a thorough exam and accurate diagnosis.

But a functional definition of the job of “optometrist” overlooks the human dimension of practice. Patients usually regard their personal relationship with a practice as more valuable than the purely technical advice they receive. Because patients are not able to distinguish between a good or bad exam, they consider eye exams a commodity available in many places. But they place high value on a practice that treats them as

individual human beings. It's the quality of the personalized care they receive that patients remember and that causes them to return.

The most effective optometrists find ways to build a human bond with each patient. They take the time to treat each patient as an important and welcome guest whose welfare is the utmost concern of the practice. They take the time to learn about each patient's daily routine so that eyewear recommendations are optimal. They express sincere empathy for a patient's expressed and observed needs and put the patient's interest first.

As you begin your optometric career, it's a good idea to reflect on the higher purpose of your daily work. Your job goes far beyond your role as a clinician taking measurements and making diagnoses. Your larger role is to preserve and improve the quality of patients' vision so that their everyday lives are more fulfilling. Your education prepares you well for the clinical aspects of your role. You will need to hone your patient communication skills to prepare yourself to learn in depth about each patient's unique needs — an equally important skill in your new career.

2. Leadership

You have earned an advanced degree in a complex technical field. The degree confers a justifiable respect from both patients and from the support staff who will assist you in your work. You will soon discover that your professional effectiveness will have a lot to do with how you leverage the respect of staff members, through your personal leadership, to improve the quality of the care you jointly deliver.

Unfortunately, many doctors view themselves as harassed healers — lone rangers surrounded by a lot of incompetent, untrained, unruly and untrustworthy staff members, who are a nuisance and who undermine the quality of care. A lot of doctors like to keep their distance from staff, avoiding the uncomfortable situations when coaching or criticism is necessary, and letting opportunities to compliment effective work slip by. These doctors think that if only they could be left alone to do their work, freed from the tedium and frustration of managing a staff, life would be a lot simpler and more pleasant and the outcomes would be better.

Depending on where you practice, your support staff could well consist of many people with minimal experience in eye care and with no training in customer service, who earn close to a minimum wage and have little motivation to perform at a high level. Like it or not, your success at satisfying patients and getting them to come back to see you will depend heavily on how well you shape this human material to help you provide exceptional care.

Truly effective optometrists devote a lot of time to their staff leadership roles, through personal example, formal training and daily coaching. If O.D.s put their leadership role on the back burner, inevitably patient care suffers. You will want to study what experts have to say about engaging staff in their work and begin applying the leadership principles you learn from your first day in practice.

3. Management by metrics

In every large corporation, a significant share of the white collar workforce is engaged in gathering, analyzing and reporting key business metrics. These measurements reveal the health of business processes and enable rapid response to changing circumstances that have been objectively defined. Without a steady flow of business metrics, decision-making is reduced to anecdotal information, intuition and personal biases. Uninformed decisions can be costly and destructive. And without quantitative measurement, goal setting and assignment of accountability become vague and ill defined.

Although optometrists spend their days taking measurements, most invest insufficient time to measure the state of their businesses. So when decisions are made, O.D.s often rely on intuitive judgments, lacking a solid base of facts as a guide. That can diminish performance.

Very few jobs in optometry lack a business dimension, the performance of which can improved by ongoing measurement. The best-run optometric practices routinely measure such variables as revenue generated per complete exam, revenue per O.D. hour, exams per O.D. hour, sources of revenue, share of sales by product type, average revenue per eyewear sale, profitability of device sales and expense category share of revenue.

Practice management expert Dr. Jerry Hayes is fond of saying: "Whatever you measure, improves." This occurs because when a result is constantly being monitored; more attention is given to the behaviors that produce the result, facilitating immediate corrective action. Without measurement, ineffective habits persist.

New O.D.s should get in the habit of constantly monitoring their performance. This establishes the basis for goal setting, the next habit of highly effective O.D.s.

4. Goal setting

Success is always a personal choice, not something that happens accidentally to lucky or talented people. Success begins with a long-term vision that must then be translated into short term, concrete goals.

Virtually every author of a self-help book concludes that people who envision and define concrete goals for themselves are much more productive and lead more fulfilled lives than those who drift from day-to-day without a specific destination in mind. Without concrete goals, years can slip by as time is spent reacting to daily demands imposed by other people.

Most O.D.s have noble goals such as helping patients, making a nice living and having a nice retirement. But these goals are too vague and open-ended to stimulate exceptional performance in daily activities. They provide no objective, quantifiable way to assess day-to-day if a goal is being achieved or not. So they lack the power to change daily behavior in a positive way. Long-term success only comes from small daily achievements.

As a freshly minted optometrist, it's important that you define your long-range goals in your professional life. What is the practice of your dreams? What do you envision to be the summary of your career accomplishment as you retire? What end goal motivated you to invest four years of your life to become an optometrist?

After you have reached some conclusions about your ultimate destination, it's time to develop near-term goals. What are the milestones along the path to your final destination that must be passed? What is your timetable for accomplishing your vision and reach the major milestones? What do you need to learn? What investments will you need to make? What do you need to accomplish this year? This quarter? This month? Today?

As you answer these questions, write down your answers. It becomes your action plan and a basis for assessing your progress.

5. Optimizing time use

Time management is a basic business skill involving conscious allocation of time around the goals and priorities of the business. Effective time management begins with clearly defined goals.

People waste the most time tending to unimportant, yet urgent, tasks imposed by third parties that do not advance long range goals. They also waste time doing habitual, comfortable work that is unnecessary or could be more efficiently accomplished by someone else.

Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden observed that the most precious resource coaches and leaders have is their time. There is never enough of it and more time cannot be purchased. What separates winners and losers in every field is how well they use their scarce time resource. Wooden conducted his team practices with a view that not a single second should be unplanned. He assigned a specific number of minutes to a schedule of individual drills, never permitting deviation from the schedule and never tolerating any behavior from team members that wasted time.

The best performing optometrists have no more time to advance their business than do the worst performers, but they use every minute more effectively. The most productive 10 percent earn nearly four times as much each hour they spend in the office than do the least productive 10 percent.

6. Continuous improvement

One distinguishing characteristic of optometrists who have built large, thriving practices is that they constantly challenge the effectiveness of their office routine, seeking ways

to do things better. They are early adopters of new technology. As they go about their daily work, they pay attention to the little things that aren't quite working as well as they might and they note them down for later discussion with the staff. They constantly experiment with new ideas, not worrying that some will fail. They understand that mistakes can teach as much as successes.

It is all too common in medical practice that professionals and staff settle into a comfortable routine and resist any change to it. While this may reduce stress, in a world of rapid change, standing still means you are falling behind.

Seeking continuous improvement also means learning from colleagues. It is valuable to visit the practices of successful, respected O.D.s in your community to see what they do. It also pays to have a network of colleagues with whom you can share ideas on business and clinical topics.

7. Risk taking

No successful business was ever created without accepting some risk. Successful business people know that they must make investments to grow their business, accepting some financial risk. Well aware that any change of routine carries risk, they also know that they must break old habits and try new ideas if they are to stay ahead of competition. People who resist moving outside of their comfort zone and treasure freedom from risk above all else are doomed to mediocrity.