

Key Success Factors in an Ophthalmology Practice

Distance Learning Course

New Employee Orientation



Table of Contents

OVERVIEW1

PHILOSOPHY OF PATIENT CARE1

CUSTOMER SERVICE.....2

COMMUNICATION.....4

TEAMWORK5

CREATING EFFECTIVE, WINNING TEAMS5

ETHICS / SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY6

CONCLUSION.....6

COURSE EXAMINATION.....7

OVERVIEW

This module is designed to provide new employees with an overview of the philosophy of patient care in an ophthalmic practice. The material features an introduction to the unique and challenging world of customer service, as well as insights into the communication skills, teamwork, and medical/social ethics required to deliver high quality patient care in today's dynamic health care environment.

There are approximately 16,500 ophthalmic practices in the United States today. What differentiates these practices? What separates them from the pack? What makes them unique? Why are some practices more successful than others? What are the key factors that make one ophthalmic practice a success and another a failure? This module takes a detailed look at the critical factors that can spell success or failure for a practice. By having a clear understanding of what makes a successful practice, new employees will have a significantly better opportunity to directly and quickly contribute to that success. Congratulations on joining the team!

PHILOSOPHY OF PATIENT CARE

In any successful ophthalmic practice, patients are THE reason the practice exists. Identifying and meeting patient needs is essential to practice success. Every team member has an opportunity -- a "moment of truth" -- to make the patient feel the practice cares about them, understands their needs and wants, and is competent to provide for those needs and wants. This responsibility rests on the shoulders of **all** team members who are part of a quality ophthalmic practice, regardless of whether or not the team member has direct interaction with the patient. All staff members -- including doctors, nurses, technicians, and clerical personnel -- must share a unified concept of caring for patients.

A patient's perception – his or her "feeling" -- about how they are treated by physicians and staff members is almost as important as their actual treatment experience and result.

Balancing technical skills and competence with caring, personalized attention to each and every patient should be expected. All team members must support each other, including physicians. Displaying a positive attitude toward patients, team members, and the practice is absolutely necessary. "Attitude" can make or break a practice and have a critical impact on patient care...the reason for the practice's being. Practice success is dependent on every team member doing his or her job competently and in a caring manner. The team must always put the patient's needs first.

ATTITUDE

"The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than success, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past—we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it. And so it is with you—we are in charge of our attitudes."

-- Charles Swindoll, Author

Medical eye care is a service-oriented business. It is an environment in which team members must deeply care about people and their visual well-being. It "takes a village" (the whole practice) to provide excellent patient care, which is one of the key factors to success in an ophthalmic practice.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

“A lot of people have fancy things to say about customer service, including me. But, it’s just a day-in, day-out, ongoing, never-ending, unremitting, persevering, compassionate type of activity.” – Leon Georman, L.L. Bean Executive

As discussed previously, patients are the reason the practice exists; therefore, providing excellence in customer service is a cornerstone for practice success. Let’s examine the concept of customer service.

What is customer service?

- **Treating patients with respect and dignity.**
Treat patients the same way you want to be treated. This is a concept learned as a child and is one of the greatest guarantees for success, not only in your relationship with patients, but also with co-workers. Patients deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect. They will respond best to sincere and honest treatment.
- **Listening to their concerns/problems.**
Listen to what your patients are saying, not what you are thinking...and respond to what you hear.
- **Identifying their needs.**
Listen to your patients to identify their needs and wants, and let them know you understand their true concerns.
- **Helping resolve concerns/problems.**
Make certain your patient understands what he/she can expect (and then find ways to give patients more than they expect; exceed their expectations).

Why is customer service important?

Extraordinary service can differentiate a practice from other practices. Customer expectations for quality service have increased dramatically in the past few years; therefore, the goal for continued improvement in service delivery is a challenge for all members of the ophthalmic practice.

- Patients are customers, and satisfied customers are crucial to practice success.
- Patients have many choices of where to go for medical eye care services. More than 41% of men and 27% of women have changed physicians because of dissatisfaction with their care.
- A “happy” patient will tell three to five others; an unhappy patient tells ten!

How can team members provide excellent customer service?

Following are suggestions for team members in their quest to provide excellent customer service:

- **Reach out:** Recognize patients immediately when they present themselves.
- **Smile, make eye contact, and address patients by name:** This helps break down barriers and creates warmth and bonding. You should always introduce yourself to the patient. Patients like to know who is working with them.
- **Be friendly:** If you are unsure if someone needs assistance, simply ask him or her. Always share information willingly and honestly. If you do not know the answer to a specific problem, find someone who does.

- **Be timely:** Respond to patients' requests or problems. If there are delays, try to explain them realistically.
- **Be a good listener:** Listen actively. Try to give each patient your full attention. Pay attention to body language and intonation. This will help you understand what is and what is not being said.
- **Take pride in your appearance:** First impressions are important. Be well groomed and follow practice guidelines.
- **Be courteous:** Place yourself in the other person's position. Show patients the same courtesy you would appreciate.
- **Demonstrate your confidence:** Confidence comes from your technical skills and knowledge. Try to solve problems within your authority and competence. If you are unsure, reach out for help and observe how the situation is handled so you can do it yourself the next time.
- **Explain what you are doing:** When working with patients, provide a brief and concise explanation of tests being performed and their significance.
- **Look for opportunities to serve:** Go out of your way to be helpful, not only to patients but co-workers as well. This creates a great work environment for everyone.
- **Remember to say goodbye ... and thanks:** End the encounter on a friendly note and call the patient by name. Make certain the patient has the information he/she wanted. Thank the patient for being there.

How should team members handle an "unhappy" patient?

Sometimes the end result of a patient encounter is a patient who is unhappy with the services received. This is unavoidable, given the number of patients you will see on a daily basis. When this occurs, treat the "unhappiness" symptoms first and then attempt to solve the patient's problem. The following suggestions may assist you in dealing with unhappy patients:

- **Do not argue:** Anger tends to subside when someone is sympathetic and helpful.
- **Listen closely:** Actively listen to the patient's problem *without interrupting*. That alone can sometimes diffuse a patient's anger.
- **Be agreeable:** Patients may not always be right, but you can sympathize with their frustration. Use positive, agreeable statements like: *I understand, I agree, I know, and I see*. People like those who agree with them and dislike the ones who disagree.
- **Ask questions:** Once the patient has been allowed to let off steam, get the facts so you can determine the best solution to the problem.
- **Apologize:** Always apologize, even if you do not agree with their point of view. If we have caused a patient to be upset, then we have reason to apologize.
- **Be understanding:** Be cognizant that many patients will have medical problems that may be upsetting or they may be on medication that is contributing to their negative behavior. They may be frightened or dealing with a variety of hidden issues.
- **Successful adage:** It is true that "you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar."

- **Take action:** Use your experience, expertise, and knowledge to try to determine a meaningful a course of action.
- **Take it personal:** Make sure the determined course of action is carried out fully. This may be the last chance for the practice to retain the patient and his or her referrals to the practice. Deliver on any promise you've made. Do not leave the patient in limbo.

While the suggestions discussed above are not unique, they can produce dramatic positive results if performed consistently by everyone in the organization. Following is a piece that sums up the customer service process:

BECAUSE THE PATIENT

Because the patient has a need,
... *We have a job to do.*

Because the patient has a choice,
... *We must strive to be the best choice.*

Because the patient has sensitivities,
... *We must be considerate.*

Because the patient has an urgency,
... *We must be quick.*

Because the patient is unique,
... *We must be flexible.*

Because the patient has high expectations,
... *We must excel.*

Because the patient has influence,
... *We have the hope of more patients.*

Because of the patient,
... *We exist.*

COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is another key to success in ophthalmic practices. Establishing good communication and rapport between patients and team members (including physicians) is an integral part of patient care. Comforting words, an unexpected gesture of kindness, or a simple expression of caring will often engender positive and favorable patient relationships.

While face-to-face communication is important in patient care, so is telephone communication between patients and staff. Often, the **first** interaction a patient has with the practice takes place with a telephone call. Also, it is important to note that approximately 95% of the patient's contact with the practice takes place over the phone. Thus, telephone communication plays a vital role in creating positive impressions and delivering excellent customer service. Specific information regarding telephone communication is covered in the module, "Overview of the Patient Encounter;" however, because of its importance in practice success, it is mentioned here.

Effective communication between the practice and patient is essential, but so is communication among team members and physicians. The practice of ophthalmology has become increasingly complex. For you to be most effective in dealings with patients, the practice will often provide employees with internal communications about new technology, medications, services provided, insurance issues, and operational issues.

Excellence in patient care depends on open, honest, direct communication with the entire team of eye care professionals. Following are several suggestions for positive, open communication:

- Directly communicate concerns, ideas, and feedback related to improvement of patient care. Do not hesitate to identify concerns, but try to provide a solution to the issue. Use the words “*I feel*” when discussing issues of concern.
- Avoid negative statements regarding other staff members and patients.
- Limit conversations between team members in areas where patients might be present. Confidentiality of information is vital to a medical practice. It is important to limit discussion that might be overheard by patients.
- Respond to patients (and other team members) positively. Avoid words or phrases such as: “I can’t,” “No,” “You should,” etc. Try to use, “I can,” “Let me check on that,” etc.
- Avoid interrupting and actively listen. Silence is not only golden; it is also productive.
- Clarify issues and concerns to avoid misunderstandings and to let the other party know that you understand (paraphrase the patient’s concerns).
- Use non-verbal techniques to show interest (eye contact, head nod, etc.).
- Remember that communication is a two-way street. Each party needs an opportunity to give feedback and information.

Face-to-face communication is generally recognized as the most effective two-way communication; however, you are encouraged to fully utilize all available and emerging communications technology, such as e-mail and voice mail.

TEAMWORK

A team can be defined as a small group of people coming together to complete a task, generally a complex task that one should not do alone. One misconception is that when a group comes together, it is automatically a team. That is not always true. “A group, as opposed to a team, has no shared goal or vision, and no sense of mutual accountability,” according to Anne McKee, a noted teamwork expert.

Teamwork requires effort from each team member and does not happen automatically; rather, it takes work and commitment. It also requires an understanding and belief in the practice’s vision and mission.

CREATING EFFECTIVE, WINNING TEAMS

Ophthalmic practices face continued challenges to provide excellence in patient care within the current environment of increasing costs and decreasing reimbursements; however, with a highly functioning team of caring professionals, these challenges become more manageable and patients are better served. Teams can share successes, difficulties, and ideas, resulting in quality patient care and patient satisfaction.

The following characteristics are required to produce effective, high-performing teams in an ophthalmology practice setting.

Team members...

- Work to serve and keep patients happy.
- Give more than expected.
- Remain flexible and adapt to change.
- Accept learning as an ongoing process.
- Are willing to share knowledge and information.
- Listen and show respect for others. The challenges of patient care are extensive.
- Exhibit mutual trust and respect for other staff members.
- Communicate openly and honestly in a tactful manner.
- Accept and implement critique.
- Base decisions on facts, not emotions or personalities.
- Problem solve rather than blame.
- Have tolerance for conflict with emphasis on resolution.
- Communicate the issues and are ready to present possible solutions.
- Take an active role in decisions affecting their work.
- Work with the spirit of cooperation and support for other team members rather than in a competitive spirit.
- Celebrate together!

Successful patient care requires team effort. If one team member fails in their “moment of truth” with the patient, the rest of the team suffers. Without each member’s participation, the team is weakened. The challenge for each team member is to foster positive, effective teamwork so patient care can be delivered at the highest-level possible. Teamwork is imperative...there is really no choice.

ETHICS/SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The foundation of the ophthalmic practice rests on principles of ethics and social responsibility. The practice exists because of the patient; therefore, the role and responsibility of each team member is to provide the best possible care for patients, without regard to the patient’s sex, gender, financial status, or ethnicity. Services must be provided with compassion, respect for human dignity, honesty, and integrity. When patient care is based on patient need rather than financial gain, the practice will succeed.

“Ethics is basically an issue of fairness: fair treatment of people. For an organization to be fair, it must balance its priorities, giving as much to people concerns as it does to economic ones. Overall, to be fair means balancing your natural self-interest with the interests of others. The ethical person knows when to put aside selfish, personal needs and act on the behalf of the welfare of many people.

...Robert H. Rosen, PhD., The Health Company

CONCLUSION

The proven adage, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” should serve as a guide to all patient treatment. The intent and goal of all medical professionals should be to do the “right thing” for the patient.

COURSE EXAMINATION

1. The primary goal of the ophthalmic practice should be to:
 - a. Make a profit for the owner physician.
 - b. Provide income and security for employees.
 - c. Provide quality medical eye care for patients.
 - d. Help the local economy by providing employment opportunities.

2. The financial success of the practice depends on:
 - a. Technical skills and competence of staff and physicians.
 - b. Fairness and honesty in treatment of patients.
 - c. Cooperative teamwork of all employees.
 - d. All of the above.

3. Many patients change physicians because of dissatisfaction in their treatment by the physician and/or staff members.
 - a. True
 - b. False

4. Which of the following IS NOT a responsibility for a staff member in providing quality customer service?
 - a. Smile, give eye contact, and call patients by name.
 - b. Interrupt patients when they talk too long because the practice is running behind.
 - c. Explain what is being done with the patients...and why; demonstrate competence.
 - d. Be friendly and courteous.

5. A team is a group of people who work together in an ophthalmic practice. It is automatically a team because all of the team members are employed by the practice.
 - a. True
 - b. False

6. Which of the following are characteristics of a winning team?
 - a. Ongoing learning and cross training.
 - b. Problem solving rather than blaming.
 - c. Showing mutual respect and support.
 - d. Flexibility and adaptability to change.
 - e. All of the above.

7. Ethical treatment of patients depends on fair treatment of patients without regard to race, religion, financial status, sex, or ethnicity.
 - a. True
 - b. False

8. Which of the following are examples of excellent customer service?
 - a. Smile, make eye contact, and address patients by name.
 - b. Be a good listener.
 - c. Bring home made cookies to the office for your favorite patients.
 - d. Be courteous.
 - e. All of the above.
 - f. A, b, and d.

9. When communicating with patients, openly express your feelings, even if they are negative.
 - a. True
 - b. False

10. When dealing with unhappy patients, always apologize, even if you do not agree with their point of view.
 - a. True
 - b. False