Keys for New Employee Training
By Lori Garland Parker
AAO Bulletin, 2002

"I know we haven't had time to work on that procedure much, but go ahead and try it. Let me know if you have any problems..." This statement may seem innocent enough, but it can often result in disaster.

The 'sink or swim' method is a common training methodology in orthodontic practices. Many times a new employee leaves the practice because they feel inadequate. It is common for the orthodontist and team to blame the new employee for not catching on fast enough, where in reality the training program was lacking.

In many cases, orthodontists think they're providing training by using the "Shadow-Sally " approach where the trainee is placed with a seasoned staff member for a short period of time. During this so-called training period, the trainee watches and supposedly learns from the veteran. What's wrong with this approach? First of all, because there is no system, the trainee may or may not learn everything he/she is supposed to learn. There is no consistency or uniformity. Secondly, the trainee will probably learn the trainer's way of doing the job, which may or may not be the right way to do it. Also, the trainer's way may not be appropriate for that particular trainee. For these reasons, it's important to approach one-on-one training as a systematic process.

Systematic, planned training enables the orthodontic practice to succeed as a whole in addition to the success of individual new employees. Having a well-trained team means greater quality and productivity and because employees are able to work effectively and efficiently, and deliver higher levels of customer service to patients and parents. The news of 'first class service' spreads into the community, which result in more referrals. Satisfied patients also help to create a more enjoyable work environment, which increases career satisfaction.

For a training program to be successful, there must be a commitment by the orthodontist and team, a well-chosen trainer, along with the investment of time and resources. The following are the first steps for developing a training program in your practice.

Effective Hiring
A successful training experience, therefore, benefits everyone involved, and it begins with hiring. A good interviewer assess applicants for motivation, tenacity, resilience, hand-eye coordination and, yes, of course, attitude.

Organization, Planning, Preparation and "The Manual"
Having well organized procedures and systems in a practice makes training easier. Existing team members know the guidelines and can pass this knowledge

on to new staff. This process includes having a comprehensive procedure manual so anyone in the office can refer to how something is to be done. This does not mean that you hand the manual to a new employee; it is used as a reference so the employee can look up anything covered during training, and be quickly reminded of how to do it.

Part of the planning and preparation also involves setting performance standards for a particular task or job. These performance standards then become the means by which the training objectives are met.

Choosing the Right Trainer

Often the most experienced person in the practice is the one chosen to train newcomers. Although it is important to have strong subject knowledge, not every experience person is cut out to be a trainer.

When selecting potential trainers, look for the following qualifications:

- **Job competence.** The most obvious qualification is the ability to do the job well. Look for staff members who have appropriate levels of technical knowledge and experience. But remember: "technical proficiency alone does not a trainer make".
- **Professionalism.** Trainers serve as role models, so they should be mature, confident, and enthusiastic. Identify employees who view training as an opportunity for professional development rather than as intrusions on their daily routine.
- **Good communication skills.** This is an absolute must. A learning environment in which trainees feel comfortable taking risks without the fear of ridicule depends on the trainer's ability to create open lines of communication. Not only must trainers be able to explain tasks and procedures clearly, they must also know how to listen actively and be sensitive to the importance of body language and nonverbal communication. They must also know how to give effective feedback on performance.
- **Rapport.** In choosing a trainer, look for a staff member who demonstrate good interpersonal skills when they interact with patients, parents and coworkers. Friendly and congenial, qualified candidates for becoming a trainer also exhibit the ability to handle conflict without losing their cool.
- **Good organizational skills.** The ability to balance various responsibilities and manage time is critical to training success.
- **Other personality characteristics** include patience, flexibility, empathy, ability to nurture others, creativity, commitment to the job, and ability to be a team player.

Once you have chosen your new employee trainer, be sure to communicate why you have selected him or her, emphasizing the benefit to that individual.

Otherwise, the designated trainer may feel "put upon" and resent this additional responsibility.

Understanding How And Why People Learn
It is important for trainers to keep in mind certain principles about how adults learn:

- **Adults learn through a variety of ways**. One person, for example, may learn better by listening. Another person, however, may be visual and prefers to read instructions. It is important to identify the preferences of each new trainee and teach to those preferences.
- **People learn best by doing, not by being told how to do something**. For example, a person learns more quickly how to get to a new location when he/she is driving the car rather than merely being a passenger.
- **Telling is not teaching or training.** How many times have you said to yourself, "I've told her and told her how to do it, but she still gets it wrong?" Just because you tell someone how to do something doesn't mean he/she understands it or has developed the skill to do the task.
- **Adults base learning on past experience**. That experience may be good or bad, but it will certainly impact the way in which your employee approaches the new job.
- **Adults prefer the concrete to the abstract.** The days of theories and concepts are over for most adults. They want the learning experience to be practical and realistic.
- **Adults are concerned with how to apply what they have learned.** Adults need to be able to apply what they have learned within twenty-four hours; otherwise, it's lost. To be effective, provide just-in-time training and make sure the new employee can immediately practice.

Make Time for Training
Every office should schedule weekly non-patient time. The trainer needs to utilize this time as part of the training process and avoid the temptation of having the new employee stock or clean. The trainer needs the support of the entire team to cover these basic tasks during the time allocated for training so the focus can be on learning. To be able to answer more questions and increase the speed of learning, allocate as much non-patient time as possible, particularly the first few weeks.

Administrative time is also a good opportunity to view training videos or CD's, read patient correspondence templates and other patient educational material. This is also a great time for typodont practice, quizzes, careful explanations of complex material and role-playing.

Take Responsibility
If the trainee hasn't learned, then the trainer, orthodontist and team must always take responsibility. What could have been done differently? Ask, "How could we have gotten through to that person?" This attitude of taking full responsibility

makes the difference between a team determined to always improve and the slippery slope of assuming we know how to do it already, which leads to ignoring our faults and mistakes.

Take Action
These are a few of the many keys to success in training new team members. What is the next step? Meet with your team to determine what actions should be taken to improve your current system of training. Set goals. Establish timelines. Decide who will be responsible for each action. Remember, it takes time to create a solid training system. Starting now brings you closer to your goal of hiring and retaining quality team members.

About the Author
Lori Garland Parker is a clinical consultant and co-founder of Consulting Network, an orthodontic management and training organization. She focuses on maximizing the talents of the clinical team, implements systems to enhance clinical efficiency and productivity, and teaches communication skills and patient motivation. She also developed the orthodontic "Train the Trainer" program and customizes a clinical procedure manual to support successful new employee integration into the practice. She can be reached at: (888) 552-9512 or lori@consultingnetwork.org.