

Get out of your comfort zone

Caroline Holland consults dentists on the value of consultants.

Last year, UK businesses spent a record £5.9bn on consultancy fees. The beneficiaries were major players in the consultancy field such as Accenture, Deloitte, Price Waterhouse Cooper, McKinsey and many more. In the world of dentistry, on a smaller scale, the influence of consultants is being felt as never before. The choice is wide.

A starting point for many dentists is to research the influences on some of the UK's most successful and pioneering colleagues. An example might be David Bloom of Senova. Formerly the Bloomsbury Dental Group, David and his partner Jay Padayachy

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are respected as much for their clinical as their business skills.

Anyone who has heard David address a conference can be in no doubt that the time spent with consultants has been time well spent.

He explains: 'I think it is very easy for a practice to be focused on its daily routine and to neglect the bigger picture. These people have an overview that we don't and I think they have a lot to offer. I am amazed at their understanding of the business of dentistry.'

Now working with Bobbi Anthony Comprehensive Care Consulting UK, Senova also benefited from the services



● David Bloom (right) with hygienist Melonie Prebble and Jay Padayachy.

of Cathy Jameson. American and charismatic, both consultants inspired David and Jay not just to take the practice to a new level but to work with the team so they buy into the process. But, it's not always plain sailing and the experience can trigger conflict in the practice.

David explains: 'It's a question of ethos and communication styles and making sure everyone fits in. You may find staff have been doing things in a way which is comfortable to them but it's not necessarily the best or right way. As long as team members are prepared for some conflict, that's fine, but that preparation for the process is important.'

The next step, David said, is to shut the practice for at least a day and involve the whole staff and then to keep the momentum going. An ongoing relationship involving several sessions a year is important to ensure the team remains on track. Dental practices should not think of team training in

terms of its cost. At a minimum of £1,500 per day, it can never be cheap but, says David, it is an investment.

Another high profile dentist who believes strongly in buying in support from management consultants is Ken Harris of Riveredge cosmetic dentistry in Sunderland. He said: 'Personally, I do not think the future of dentistry is sustainable without the kind of interventions that these consultants offer.'

Like David, he recognizes that the buy-in of team members is essential to the business success of his practice. His annual spend on training and development is in excess of £50K which includes taking all the team to the Greater New York dental meeting every year. Without well motivated staff, he says, his vision for his practice as well as his own abilities as a clinician are meaningless.

When it comes to employing a mentor, he too has gone down the ➔

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● Ken Harris and his team.

☞ American route. He invited in several consultants to meet his staff and then they chose who they wanted. In addition to team training with Jameson Management, he invests in sessions for himself with Bill Blatchford.

'Some advisors won't tell you the truth because they are scared of losing your business but Bill is happy to insult me. He will say 'that sucks' and that's what I need. I can ring him and talk to him for an hour and personally I find that very stimulating.'

Consultants push you out of your comfort zone and that, Ken believes, is where you need to be.

'We may be very good clinicians but often we cannot see the wood for the trees.'

Having an accountant who is part of the business vision is also helpful. Ken's accountant is Alan Suggett of Baker Tilly, one of a small number of UK accountants who believes that his role as a business strategist is every bit as important as getting the tax return in on time.

Said Alan: 'All dental practices which want to progress should undertake some strategic planning

with a business advisor. I like to focus on the big picture as well as the nuts and bolts of accounting. A comparison might be a garage which provides basic MOTs but could also be tuning engines so its customers reach their destination more quickly.'

Dental teams need training and support so that they can convey honestly to patients the value of private care.

Nick More is a Leicestershire dentist who turned to a UK consultant, Sheila Scott, a psychologist and a business coach. He had converted his adult list to private patients to and wanted to put his fees up but was anxious that they might leave.

'She gave me confidence. She carried out a survey which revealed how loyal my patients are and she encouraged me to put up my prices. She predicted that no more than 10 per cent would leave and I knew that I could afford this and went ahead.'

Like her American counterparts, Sheila also worked with Nick's team members so they supported the fee

increase and could explain to patients the value of the treatment. Given the extent of loyalty that the UK population feels towards the National Health Service, blind loyalty given that they are still paying for their treatment, dental teams need training and support so that they can convey honestly to patients the value of private care.

In the end, it's confidence that everyone needs and it's confidence and self-belief that good consultants deliver to their clients. There are many to choose from - consultants, speakers, coaches and trainers - all with dental practice experience and it's important, if you want to move to a new level, you choose the right person for your practice.

Are you looking for a business vision, a new ethos, a financial strategy, team-building or do you simply want to go private and don't know how? Any dental practice thinking of hiring the service of a consultant needs to be clear about the outcomes they want, how much they plan to spend and remember that leaving the comfort zone can be difficult. ■