

Breaking Habits Test Your Role As A Chairside Assistant

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Have you have read the book by Stephen R. Covey, the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People? It's a timeless book on powerful lessons in personal growth and change. In 1990 while working as a chairside assistant I was given this book to read along with the rest of the team by our doctor, Dr. Smith. With the book came an assignment, read the book and write a one-page synopsis on how the material applies to our role and responsibilities in the practice. In others words what did we learn from that book that could be applied to what we do on a daily basis.

After reading the book, I came up with a quick yes/no test to meet my assignment. The test was based on my experiences in the clinic and would rate the quality of a highly effective chairside assistant. I called it "The Chairside Test for Highly Effective Assistants".

The great thing about "the test" is that it's easy to get a quick yes or no to each question. This isn't a test to figure out how much torque needs to be placed on the upper incisors or if the molar bracket you are holding without the identification marks goes on the upper/lower right or left tooth. The test is about how YOU take responsibility for your actions and the outcome of what you do. Give yourself 1 point for each "yes" answer. The letdown about "the test" is that you really should not use it to make sure that you get a raise.

A score of 7 is perfect, 5 is acceptable but 4 or lower indicates that you have issues. The truth is that most assistants, when asked, feel that they are operating with a score of 5, however not 100% of the time. That is where improvement should begin, working to your best abilities 100% of the time with 100% of your patients.

These are not the only factors that determine if you are a "highly effective chairside assistant. But, all else being equal, if you get these 7 things right, you'll have a great start at consistently delivering exceptional service to your patients and will be a contributing member to your team.

The Clinical Assistant Test

1. Are you proactive?
2. Do you begin your day with the end in mind?
3. Do you prioritize your daily, weekly and monthly tasks?
4. Do you always think win-win for your patients and team members?
5. Do you listen to what others say, wanting to understand?
6. Do you synergize with your team?
7. Do you invest in yourself?

1. Are you proactive?

Do you take the initiative everyday to review the schedule and patients to be seen in the operatory along with the specific procedures to be preformed? Do you take responsibility for the outcome of everything you touch?

An example would be preventing emergencies and issues before they happen. New issues and unexpected patients and procedures happen all too frequently in an orthodontic practice. Although I coach team members to be able to handle unexpected patients and procedures, I encourage them to spend much more of their time focusing on preventing them from happening in the first place. When these events are prevented in this manner, your practice and patients will be better served.

You can quickly get a handle on emergencies and unexpected procedures by looking at recurring problems and investigating the reasons behind them. With this information in hand, you can then develop a plan or system that eliminates the cause or reduces the frequency of the occurrence.

If you take this approach for the top three challenging issues in the clinic, you'll make major strides in positioning yourself and the practice to work more proactively.

2. Do you begin each procedure or project with the end in mind?

When you're reviewing the procedure or a project you are involved in do you think first of the desired outcome? Do you start with a clear understanding of what your goals for the appointment or project will be?

Tips:

- Clearly define what you are trying to accomplish.
- Think through the individual task.
- Organize all the materials to meet your purpose along with understand the time restraints of the tasks.
- No matter what the project or task may be, always do it beyond your expectations. Excellence should be the standard not the exception.

3. Do you prioritize your tasks?

If you are working in the operatory without an organized prioritize "to do list", it is possible you are going to forget an important task that could effect the outcome of a patients visit or not utilize your working hours to their best possible use. Many clinical assistants think they can hold the list in their heads. It is easy to forget during the rush of after school patients, or the next morning. It is critical to prioritize your task each day based on the schedule and modify and check off tasks on your list as the day unfolds. Keep a small notebook or pad handy in your lab jacket pocket. Having a visual reference insures you stay focused on the priorities for the day and the task needed to take care of your patients.

4. Do you always think win-win? Do you, without hesitation or thought, step in to assist your co-workers without being asked? Do you think about YOU or the clinical team when it is 11:45 or 4:45 and everyone has a patient in the chair? With the win-win attitude, you look out for the patient at hand; however, your overall goal should be to assist all the patients and your co-workers so that the team and patients win together. With a little effort and team work (cleaning up for another assistant, writing up a chart, giving instructions, setting up or passing instruments, mixing materials) you will insure that the patients will be well cared for (Cathy – I don't think a sentence is supposed to end with "of" or "for". The entire team benefits from your win-win attitude.

5. Do you listen to what others say, trying to put yourself in their shoes before responding or reacting?

Listening and understanding what your co-workers, patients and doctor are trying to tell you, is not as easy as we think. So many times, we are pre-occupied with setting up for the next patient or reading a chart while someone is telling you about the schedule change, your next patient or the staff meeting schedule tomorrow at lunch. Your saying to yourself, can't they see I am busy, can't they just write down the information on the schedule, don't they see that these interruptions slow me down? Key communication skills such as listening and understanding are just as important as a good fitting band. Here are a few key points to consider on listening:

- Remember that your one and only job while listening is to understand your patients or co-workers experience, feelings, attitude, or point of view.
- Always give your patient your full attention. Make sure you are not thinking about finishing the archwire change and moving on to your next task.
- Ask questions to encourage your patient and to clarify things for yourself.
- Repeat back to the individual in your own words what you heard them say to insure that you completely understand what they have said.
- Watch your body language, remain open to what they are saying. Avoid crossing your arms, shaking your head, rolling your eyes.

- Try not to be sarcastic when a fellow employee says something you don't agree with or feel is not important at the time.
- Try to understand the feeling behind what your patient is saying, as well as the content.

6. Do you synergize with your team?

Synergy is like flossing: everybody agrees that it's a good thing, but we don't always do it. One of the best ways to focus all of the clinical team's energies and talents is to establish teams (patient motivation team and clinical efficiency team) Let the clinical team decide who to hire and how to improve productivity. Discuss all "bright ideas" offered by each assistant. The clinical team wants to feel part of the practice and wants to know their voices and ideas are being heard. By establishing these teams and utilizing the multiple skills and talents, you will find improve productivity, patient care and morale.

7. Do you invest in yourself?

Here's the trouble. We all know that most chairside assistants are typically mothers and wives with much of their time focused on taking care of others from working in the practice on patients to tending to their family needs. There is not a whole lot of time left over at the end of the day for their personal growth and health.

You must allow a minimum of 30 minutes per day to Invest in yourself, both emotional and physically, to build a strong mind and body. Walk, read a book, listen to a motivational tape. As you invest in yourself, over time you will find that you approach life and work enthusiastically and confidently.

- During your lunch hour, or at the end of the day take 30 minutes to walk around the neighborhood.
- Driving to and from work, listen to a motivational tape or even inspirational music
- As a team, read a book on customer service and share your thoughts during a staff meeting on how you can improve patient relations

Three Ways to Use The “7-Habits Chairside Test”

1. Rate your own clinical team - If you're the doctor or supervisor of the clinical team, use this as a checklist to make sure your team is working as well as possible.
2. Rate yourself - If you need to improve, start today!
3. If you're trying to decide whether to hire an assistant, ask your prospective employee how they rate themselves on this test. If it's too low, you may consider interviewing a few more candidates. Otherwise, you may be hiring someone that will make you frustrated and your team unproductive.

In closing, take the time to read or re-read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. As you read think about your role in the practice, “a professional service giver”, clinical assistant. What can you learn from the seven habits that will move you to the next level of job satisfaction and performance? Ask yourself, “What can I do to be better?” “What can I do to make a difference for every patient I touch?” Write your thoughts on paper then take action!