

10 Ways to Maintain Staff Morale During the COVID-19 Crisis and Position your Practice to Bounce Back



Ten strategies to consider, even if your office is closed or your staff are furloughed.

BY KASEY D'AMATO, PA-C

>> The US healthcare industry is facing uncertain times, and many dermatology offices around the country have been impacted by COVID-19. Lack of patients, nervous staff, and government shutdowns have forced hundreds of dermatology practices to either temporarily shut down or limit patients to telemedicine or urgent cases only. More unsettling is that nobody knows how long this situation will last. The global pandemic has left small dermatology medical practice owners wondering if they will be able to keep their businesses afloat and left employed physicians, advanced practice providers, and ancillary staff wondering if they will have a job to come back to. The emotions of fear and uncertainty can be overwhelming for both the practice owner and the providers and staff, but business owners who have creative leadership abilities will find ways to motivate their staff, even if they have been furloughed, and can actually expand their business opportunities during this unprecedented time.

The employed providers and staff are looking for leadership during this crisis; let's be honest, the entire country is looking for leadership anywhere we can find it during this unprecedented time. Providers and staff are looking for reassurance from employers that they will have jobs to go back to, reassurance that dermatology will be a thriving industry once again after COVID-19 passes, and the basic reassurance that if they hunker down at home right now and ride out the storm that things will be "ok." Human beings are most happy when they have something to work toward and when they feel a sense of progress, so

being home without much purpose leaves many people feeling uneasy and overly anxious. Savvy business owners and leaders know that the secret to being successful on the other side of this thing is to keep providers and staff engaged as much as possible, even if the team isn't physically in the same office together.

10 STRATEGIES

Below are 10 ways that you can keep staff engaged and come out with a stronger team and stronger business on the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic

1 Bi-Weekly Team Zoom Meetings. Hosting a bi-weekly zoom meeting with your team allows you to check in and

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the**bottomline**

see how everyone is doing. Share funny stories, maybe some cooking recipes, etc., and let them see that you are in the same boat they are and keeping your spirits up. If the leader has a positive attitude, the members of the community will follow that mindset. This is a simple way to keep the team feeling connected and build a sense of community.

2 Social Media. Social media has been controversial as a marketing tool for medicine for a long time, but in these pandemic times, social media is a massive opportunity. It is an opportunity for practice owners to share updates on clinical treatments for the lay person, an opportunity to “tease” treatments that will be coming soon, post before and after images (that are HIPAA compliant), and establish yourself as an expert in the community. It is also important to encourage all of the providers to be doing the same thing. If every provider is posting one to two articles or updates or images or stories per week related to your industry, that is exponential reach and a massive amount of people that are seeing you and your providers as the leading experts in the community. Patients will rush to schedule appointments when available, because they will feel comfortable and confident in the providers after watching weeks of their valuable content on their social media feed.

3 Monthly Community Zoom Meeting. Encourage your providers to host a monthly zoom meeting to answer questions about a particular treatment. This is an opportunity to do a virtual consultation for potentially 100s of people at one time. Make sure to capture email addresses or phone numbers of those who attend the Zoom meeting so that you can follow up when your office opens back up and you can let those people know that they can now schedule their treatments.

4 Telemedicine. If your practice is not already offering telemedicine, delegate a provider to take the lead and do the research to set it up. Telemedicine is most likely going to remain more mainstream in almost all specialties, so why not get a jump start on it now while you or one of your providers has the time to vet it out. Providers will most likely welcome the opportunity to be able to see patients remotely rather than be laid off completely and this can be a nice supplement to the practice when things eventually go back to normal.

5 Email Marketing. Email marketing is very easy to do, and there are lots of free email marketing programs (Constant Contact, MailChimp, etc.). A weekly email blast to

patients with office updates, staff photos, new procedures, or plans for the future is a great way to keep your office top of mind. If your office is not already doing this, one of your providers may be happy to take the lead and draft a weekly office newsletter in exchange for maintaining their benefits, or for a small stipend, or a small increase in bonus once things get back to normal.

6 Office “facelift.” Now might be the perfect opportunity to take a deep dive into product inventory counts or maybe you own your building and the exam rooms could use a fresh coat of paint? Support staff might welcome these types of projects that they may not have been excited about in the past if it means that they can maintain their paycheck and avoid the headaches of filing for unemployment. Of course, you want to make sure they can maintain safe social distancing during any non-clinical work projects or time together in the office.

7 Staff group texting. People want to be inspired and entertained during times of crisis. The news and social media is stressful and very intense for most people. Make a commitment to send your team regular uplifting messages, or better yet, lighthearted joke memes, or videos. People gravitate toward others who make them laugh and feel happy, so being a bright spot in your teams/day will go a long way to making sure they come back to work for you and don’t interview with your competitor down the street when this is all over.

8 Set short- and long-term goals for your practice and include your team. What is the one major resource you usually don’t have a lot of? Time. Right now, like it or not, you most likely have more time than you are used to. Utilize this time to reflect on what you want for your business long term. Do you eventually want to expand to multiple satellite offices? Do you want to expand services? Do you want to add providers?

Spend some time working on business models and projections for your business ideas and if you find a model that you are excited about, share it with your physician or colleagues and collaborate together on how to bring your vision to life after the pandemic passes. Use this time to delegate different duties so that each provider can also get excited about your vision and feels included and part of the long-term company plan. Make sure to structure the goals to be a win-win for everyone involved and use this time to map out all the details as a team and begin executing the plan as soon as things get back to normal.

(Continued on page 60)

>> FEATURE STORY

(Continued from page 49)

9 **Pre-schedule appointments.** Make sure your phones are being answered and create a list of anyone who calls with something non-urgent. Then make sure you or your staff are the ones to call them back to schedule their appointment rather than telling the patient to call the office back in a few weeks or a few months. If you or your staff keep the list of names and phone numbers of people who have called for appointments, then you collectively have control to fill the providers' schedules quickly when your office opens up again.

10 **Source professional development resources.** There are a lot of resources available online for providers to advance their skill sets. Whether it is online courses for clinical skills or maybe even online courses for marketing or business development, now is a great time to encourage providers to develop themselves on both a personal or professional level. Many people underestimate the power of personal development but encouraging providers to spend some their "self quarantine" time on personal development will yield confident providers who feel fulfilled and happy to tackle anything thrown their way when this pandemic has finally passed.

WEATHER THE STORM

Business owners and leaders who recognize that there is invisible opportunity even in times of economic strain and uncertainty will emerge with bustling and thriving practices at the end of the current crisis. If history repeats itself, based on the companies that emerged after the Great Depression and after the Recession in the late 2000s, we will most likely see some practices that soar far above the success that they experienced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Medical practices with solid cohesive teams will be best positioned to weather even the darkest of storms. ■

Kasey D'Amato, PA-C is President of Certified Physician Assistant Consulting and a graduate of Tony Robbins & Chloe Madanes Life & Career Coach Program. She founded Certified Physician Assistant Consulting in 2009 and is the nation's leading expert on PA salary structures. Kasey's combined expertise as a clinician, practice administrator, serial entrepreneur, and coach allows her the ability to have unique insight into the fundamentals of operating an efficient and successful medical practice. Ms. D'Amato has consulted with hundreds of Dermatology practices and Dermatology PAs over the past decade and her fundamental mission is to provide creative solutions and win-win outcomes for common practice management conflicts or problems. certifiedpaconsulting.com