

MONOGRAPH: 11

Shaping a Strong Service Culture



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ABSTRACT

Background:

Every service business has a culture, even if unconsciously shaped and never verbalized. The best service companies have customer-centric cultures that are consciously created and continuously nurtured by management. In such companies, the culture is the differentiating feature that customers value highly and talk about when recommending the business to others.

Recommendation:

To develop a strong service culture, practice owners must formulate a compelling, patient-centric mission; create a working environment that promotes staff engagement, growth and innovation; identify concrete behavioral standards that assure effective execution of the mission; and continuously nurture the practice culture.

Conclusion:

A strong service culture will become a primary asset of an optometric practice and a driver of patient loyalty and referrals.

Introduction

Sales representatives observe that every optometric office has a unique personality – a distinctive culture that shapes how people who work in the office go about their daily routines. Accurate assessment of an office culture helps reps make their interactions more productive. In one office, things might occur haphazardly, with no order or predictability, and people are always running behind. In another, staff moves through the day like automatons, robotically completing their functional tasks without expressing any emotion and with minimal human interaction. In another, the signage and office process is all about policies and prohibitions to be sure that patients can't cheat the office. In another, there is an energetic buzz and employees appear to be enjoying helping patients.

The reality is that all businesses, including optometric practices, have an internal culture – shared values, beliefs and habitual behaviors that influence how customers are treated. In most businesses, cultures are neither planned nor articulated – they unconsciously evolve and are usually rooted in the business owner's unspoken mental model of the nature of the business/customer and owner/employee relationship.

In many personal service businesses, a company's internal culture is actually the brand – the cluster of meanings, or personality, that customers remember and base their loyalty upon. When continuously nurtured, a strong culture can become the principal differentiating asset of a business.

While an optometric practice culture is often invisible to those working in the office, culture is always immediately visible to patients, vendors and new employees. New patients visiting the office quickly form accurate impressions about what's important to the practice, how it values patients, the level of teamwork, the attention given to detail and the success and prosperity of the enterprise. Within a few days of starting work at a practice, new employees absorb the business culture and align their attitudes and behavior with it – for better or worse.

Though practice owners seldom pay much conscious attention to shaping their office culture, it is a powerful determinant of success. Business analysts and consultants unanimously observe that companies that enjoy strong growth over the long term have powerful cultures defining customer-centric core values that are embraced by most employees. Their executives spend time and resources to nurture their culture, knowing it is the glue that binds employees to pursue service excellence.

Once entrenched, an office culture can be more difficult to change. But it is worth the effort to reshape an undefined, perhaps schizophrenic, existing culture to create consistently favorable impressions among patients. This can result in stronger loyalty and more referrals.

This monograph provides guidance for practice owners to conduct a self-analysis of their current office culture and proposes concrete steps that both new and established practices can take to create a vibrant service culture.

What is Your Practice Culture?

In optometric practices, the office culture is usually the product of the owner's mental models of the practice/patient and owner/staff relationships. Sometimes a combination of a strong-willed office manager and a passive owner shapes an office culture in the office manager's image, but this is atypical. Other staff members usually have little influence on shaping an office culture, even as they perpetuate it in daily activity.

A practice owner's often unconscious mental model of the business incorporates convictions about questions such as those listed below:

- Why am I an optometrist?
- What are my long term goals for my life and the practice?
- What aspects of my job do I really like and which do I like to avoid?
- Why do patients come to the office?
- What benefits are most important to patients?
- What must the office do to keep patients coming back?
- How much energy am I willing to expend to achieve service excellence?
- What is appropriate behavior when I interact with patients?
- What relationship should I adopt with employees?
- What rewards are important to employees? Why do they come to work?

An owner's answers to these questions are seldom explicitly articulated to staff, but they are conveyed to employees through an owner's daily interactions with patients and staff and by an owner's decisions. Even if an owner's mental model of the practice is never written down, it's hidden rules are unmistakable to staff and shape the office culture.

Few practice owners spend much time reflecting on their underlying assumptions about their business, perhaps thinking that their view of the world is obvious, based on common sense and not worth much analysis or discussion. Pause for a moment before continuing to read this monograph and jot down your top-of-mind answers to the self-analysis questions above.

Conventional OD Mental Model of Practice/Patient and Owner/Staff Relationships

Some typical (but not universal) answers to the culture-defining questions, that ODs carry in the back of the minds, and non-verbally express through everyday actions and decisions, are:

- *Why am I an optometrist?* To make a nice living and use my advanced education to help people see better and to preserve their eyesight.
- *What are my long-term goals for my life and the practice?* To build the practice to assure a nice lifestyle today and to retire in comfort and security.
- *What aspects of my job do I really like and which do I like to avoid?* I enjoy objective diagnosis of patients' condition. But I get bored listening to patients' repetitive, long-winded stories. I avoid selling. And I postpone dealing with staff conflicts, office administration or long-range planning.
- *Why do patients come to the office?* To have an eye exam and buy corrective devices; a few come for treatment of ocular conditions.
- *What benefits are most important to patients?* Seeing well and keeping their eyecare outlay as low as possible.
- *What must the office do to keep patients coming back?* Provide a thorough, competent exam, offer a broad selection of devices at competitive prices and treat people courteously.
- *What is appropriate behavior when I interact with patients?* I am an authority figure to patients. They respect my training and expertise. They want my

objective diagnosis. I don't want to appear like a salesman so I delegate selling to staff. To maximize revenue, I need to process patients efficiently through the exam process and keep my time investment to a minimum.

- *How much energy am I willing to expend to achieve real excellence?* Once I have a comfortable income and a daily routine I'm satisfied with, I will try to keep it going with the least effort possible.
- *What relationship should I adopt with employees?* I am the boss and pay their salaries and I determine how things will work. My employees must follow my rules. They should be glad they have a job here. Some employees are lazy, some are sloppy, some are rude, some are wasteful. I need to police their behavior to keep things on track.
- *What rewards are important to employees? Why do they come to work?* Money; they come for a paycheck.

Typical owner views about the culture-defining questions listed above are not misguided or irrational. Nor are they fatal to a practice. The truth is most practice owners make a nice income and enjoy reasonably high patient retention with an office culture that was never planned or articulated.

But an office culture that grows out of the conventional mental model of the practice/patient and owner/employee relationships is a recipe for mediocrity. The service offered by such an office is likely to be perceived by patients as ordinary, non-distinctive, unexceptional, and unmemorable—a commodity available from many providers.

The conventional OD model of the practice/patient relationship is not wrong-headed, but it is short-sighted and will limit success. If the practice culture is rooted in a functionally oriented definition of customer service, emphasizing efficiency and interests of the business, it will fail to fully satisfy patient needs or inspire the staff. When an authoritarian view of the owner/staff relationship pervades, there is likely to be little employee engagement with the service mission of the practice.

Shaping an Office Culture

The ideal service culture is one in which doctor and staff's main focus is on producing the best possible patient experience to satisfy patients' higher order needs and one which continuously seeks to improve and become best-in-class. In practices with a strong service culture, there is often a palpable buzz of enthusiasm to help patients.

Many established practice owners dream of having an ideal service culture and may understand that their culture has flaws, but they are skeptical that they will be able to change a culture that is entrenched with a tenured staff, after many years of being the modus operandi.

Other practices have weak service cultures because their owners hold a conventional view of the practice/patient relationship, are self satisfied and complacent and think their current service is fully adequate. A 2010 MBA survey showed that 79% of OD practice owners rate their own service as "well above average," which is a statistical impossibility if based on objective assessment. 32% of practice owners say their service is "the best in the community," also a gross over-statement of reality by many owners.

The critical first step to improve a service culture is to become convinced that the current culture is not ideal and that an opportunity exists to reshape staff values and habitual behavior. The appendix contains a self-assessment quiz which will be helpful in evaluating the status of your current service culture.

With a strong conviction that change is desirable, it is possible to reshape a practice culture with a structured process to identify core values and patient-friendly methods of operation and to gain staff buy-in. The priorities in a culture-shaping process are outlined below.

First priority: Define the practice mission in patient-centric terms.

To create a strong service culture it is first necessary to identify the center of excellence that will differentiate a practice from all others, expressed in terms of the higher order end benefits that patients seek when they visit an eye care provider. This will become the “mission” of the practice -- the central idea and cornerstone on which the practice culture will rest. If a practice mission is never articulated, there is no shared purpose understood by all and no rallying cry to inspire teamwork.

A conventional OD mental model of patient need focuses a service process on providing functional benefits (thorough exams, effective corrective devices). These are essential, but are commodity-like benefits that all practices provide. But such a conventional mission can't inspire employee passion or patient loyalty, and do not result in a strong service culture. Satisfying higher-order patient needs (see discussion below) has much higher value for patients. When larger practice goals are visible to patients in the human interactions that occur, a highly positive office culture is perceived and loyalty is strong.

Effective mission statements don't mention the business need for profit, understanding that profits will occur naturally when patient needs are the primary focus of office process and policy. Patients of practices with strong service cultures always perceive that patient interests come first, not the owner's financial interests.

Motivating mission statements avoid empty platitudes such as “quality” or “good value” and create a concrete vision of how patients will feel when served properly. The specificity of the description of desired patient emotions will help define behavioral standards for all who work in the practice

A compelling mission statement must flow from the inner convictions of the owner. Owner convictions about practice mission cannot be manufactured by a committee.

Effective mission statements always incorporate the goal of being the best at something. Employees aspire to excel and achieve something significant in their life at work. It's not fulfilling to be ordinary. If an owner has no strong commitment to a service culture of excellence, there will be no sustained excellence. Without a genuine owner commitment to excellence, owner behavior will not be a positive model for staff and its absence will allow a culture of mediocrity to persist.

See MBA Monograph “Mission Statements and Practice Positioning” for additional discussion of this first priority in creating a strong service culture.

What Patients Value

Satisfying higher order patient needs can become an enduring, motivating cornerstone of a practice culture. A practice that consciously attempts to address patients' deep emotional needs will be more highly valued by patients and it will elevate the staff's perception of the importance of their daily work.

Studies among patients of medical service businesses indicate that loyalty is strongly influenced by the success of a medical practice at addressing three key higher order needs listed here. Below each need are details on how patients feel when their higher order need is satisfied.

FEELING OF BEING CARED FOR

- They empathize with my condition/situation
- They really want to help me
- They guard my privacy
- They care about me as an individual and understand my personal situation and address my specific problem

TRUST IN COMPETENCE

- I trust the medical knowledge of doctor and staff
- They are up-to-date with the latest technology
- Their diagnosis is credible
- They display great attention to detail in the cleanliness and efficiency of the office
- They explained the diagnosis and treatment plan in terms I understand and am comfortable with

LIFE IMPROVEMENT

- Their treatment plan effectively solves my problem and makes my daily life better
- My health is restored and protected
- I was treated with respect and as a valued person
- They were easy to deal with and respected my time

It is likely that most practice mission statements will focus on one or more of these higher order patient needs.

Many service leaders who consciously nurture their internal culture, articulate and share with employees a set of core values. These delineate the rules that guide their decisions and daily interactions with customers, as well as internally. This monograph identifies many of the values that companies with strong service cultures espouse. It's likely that publication of core values is most valuable in larger companies in which the owners do not have daily contact with employees and are not able to convey their values through personal example.

Second priority: Become a great place to work.

Executives of companies with outstanding service cultures (Disney, Zappos, Southwest Airlines, Nordstrom, USAA, etc.) understand that customers will not be properly treated unless their own service providers are properly cared for. There are no great service cultures in companies that are not great places to work. This is universally true—no exceptions.

Great places to work are businesses with great customer-centric missions beyond making money or satisfying functional needs. They seek to provide something extraordinary, emotionally engaging, exceptional and unexpected to customers, enabling their employees to experience pride at being the best. Workers in great companies recognize that “the way we do things here” is different and superior.

Beyond motivating employees with a compelling mission, great employers also treat their staffs with respect and caring, displaying a sensitivity to both the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards of work that people seek.

There is an extensive literature about achieving staff alignment with corporate missions. Two excellent discussions about gaining employee engagement can be found in *First, Break All The Rules* by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman and *It's Your Ship* by Captain D. Michael Abrashoff.

Among the general methods leading service companies use to engage their staffs are:

- Continuously connect the daily tasks of service providers to the larger mission

of the business. In doctors' offices, doctors too often inadvertently convey that the only really important work is done by the doctor and all the rest is trivial support activity. In reality, everyone's job is essential, because owners would not write payroll checks for non-essential work.

- Display sincere interest in individual staff member's families, personal goals, interests and challenges. Recognize and advance employees' aspirations and constantly praise accomplishments.
- Provide the tools to enable staff to work efficiently, with less waste and hassle.
- Engage staff in shaping the work process. Staff is usually more aware of the small details of a work process that make it impractical or unworkable. When staff is encouraged to incorporate this experience and shape the daily work methods, they are more likely to embrace the process.
- Empower people to make decisions and hold them accountable for specific goals. When employees believe they have little latitude and are being micro-managed, they are sure to display little initiative or creativity and will find their work less fulfilling.
- Eliminate annoyances and mindless repetitive tasks that drain energy.
- Inject a sense of fun in the work.

A practice owner with an authoritative management style may find it difficult to alter that style overnight. Here are some concrete steps to build staff engagement.

1. Conduct one-on-one discussions with each staff member, lasting at least 15 minutes, at least once a year. In addition to reinforcing the practice mission, use the meeting to learn about details of the staff member's family life, their goals and aspirations, their desire for job advancement, their frustrations and satisfactions at work. Give complete, undivided attention during any private conversation with staff.
2. Actively solicit input from staff during daily conversations and staff meetings to continuously improve the work process. A universal trait of companies with strong service culture is an insistence on continuous improvement. This must be driven from the top. There should be an expectation that small improvements will be daily occurrences.
3. Conduct a post-mortem with staff on all major change initiatives to identify further refinements.
4. Cross train and encourage personal development of staff through continuing education.
5. Show zero tolerance for any behavior that jeopardizes the practice mission with immediate, constructive criticism. This will be more effective at changing behavior than remarks during an annual performance appraisal.
6. Avoid critical remarks that convey doubt about an employee's competence or intentions or a disregard for an employee's self image. Never punish bearers of bad news.
7. Share financial goals with staff and continuously share information about the practice's progress. Secrecy and silence breed isolation. Celebrate and praise accomplishments.

Third priority: Create concrete behavioral standards to align the daily office process and office policies with the practice mission.

While critical to success, it's not enough to elaborate the service aspirations of the owner and gain staff acceptance of the practice mission. To create favorable impressions of the practice culture among patients, the mission must be brought to life in the daily words and actions of the doctor and staff. To produce a consistently favorable impression, the words and actions must be choreographed in detail with structured input from the staff.

Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden understood that his ultimate mission was to win games and championships. But as he coached his teams he did not dwell on the end goal of victory. Instead he focused on teaching in bite-sized pieces the detailed skills involved in rebounding, passing, free throw shooting, defense, etc. He knew that mastery of these skills would guarantee victory.

In optometric practice, staff must learn the skills, demeanor and words that will create the most favorable impressions at each moment of truth in an office visit and make their use habitual. A lofty mission is not enough. A strong service culture does not exist without superior execution and effective execution is all about attention to detail. A set of habitual, shared behaviors that advance the practice mission will become a solid foundation of the practice culture.

MBA offers a series of service excellence workshops to help owners in re-shaping the service culture of their practices by translating the practice mission into concrete behavior. Each workshop offers a discussion outline for a staff meeting discussing some specific aspect of service. A good starting point for a culture reshaping program would be to use the workshops titled "Service Mapping," "Service Recovery" and "Everything Speaks," which can be downloaded on www.mba-ce.com. An MBA monograph titled "Patient Experience Engineering" provides a detailed discussion of a process to establish concrete service standards.

Fourth priority: Continuously reinforce the practice mission and non-negotiable standards.

Pastors encourage their congregations to attend services every week, knowing that high moral standards are maintained through frequent reminders to avoid lapses. Similarly a strong service culture requires continuous reinforcement.

First and foremost, it's necessary for practice owners to walk the talk – live the mission and values of the practice culture in daily activity. Any perceived discrepancy between an owner's stated mission and core values and an owner's behavior will undermine employee engagement and degrade the culture.

Businesses with strong service cultures are characterized by high levels of communication between supervisors and staff and among frontline workers. On a daily basis, owners should provide constructive coaching on service standards to assure staff alignment. There must be daily reminders to staff of the practice mission. This will powerfully convey the importance an owner attaches to the practice's mission and service culture.

Conducting frequent staff meetings is another essential strategy for reinforcing a service culture. These provide opportunities to share successes, learn from failures and remind staff about core values and the overall mission.

Finally, a daily, pre-opening huddle is an effective way to perpetuate a service culture. During this brief meeting, the patients who will be served that day can be reviewed and their preferences and special needs shared. Recent occurrences of above and beyond service can be celebrated, Defects in the physical environment can be identified and responsibility for resolution assigned. Questions about patient complaint resolution can be discussed.

Service Culture Self-Assessment

To assess the current status of your service culture, objectively answer each of the following questions and tabulate your response. A score of 25 or higher indicates an opportunity for improvement.

1. Do we place higher value on our time or on patients' time?

	SCORE
Patients' time more valued	1
Our time more valued	2

1. Do we greet patients as if they were case files or more as welcome, honored guests?

	SCORE
Welcome, honored guests	1
Case files	2

2. Do we make an effort to understand special patient needs and customize treatment plans or do we treat most patients about the same?

	SCORE
Customize treatment plans	1
Treat most patients the same	2

3. Do patients completing office visits feel important and valued by the practice?

	SCORE
Yes, always	1
Sometimes	2

4. Is our first assumption when conflict occurs with patients that the patient is right or that the office is right?

	SCORE
Patient is right	1
Office is right	2

5. Is staff empowered to make things right for patients or must they ask for permission for policy exceptions?

	SCORE
Staff empowered	1
Permission required	2

6. Are patient complaints typically handled as opportunities to exceed expectations or with defensiveness?

	SCORE
As opportunities	1
With defensiveness	2

7. Does the office make a constant effort to improve processes or are we generally content to preserve a comfortable status quo?

	SCORE
Constant effort to improve	1
Content with status quo	2

8. Are office processes mainly geared to patients' comfort and convenience and to reduce patient anxiety or more for the convenience of the doctor and staff?

	SCORE
Comfort/convenience of patient	1
Convenience of doctor/staff	2

9. Do policy decisions usually favor patient special requests for exceptions or do they usually protect the practice's interests?
- | | SCORE |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Satisfy patient request | 1 |
| Protect practice interests | 2 |
10. Do I deal immediately with patient complaints about staff rudeness or do I silently tolerate lapses?
- | | SCORE |
|---|-------|
| Immediately deal with rudeness complaints | 1 |
| Tolerate | 2 |
11. Do I try to fully understand why employees who leave the practice choose to go elsewhere or not?
- | | SCORE |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| Make effort to understand reasons | 1 |
| Make no special effort | 2 |
12. If asked to state the practice mission, would staff members give a consistent answer, or not?
- | | SCORE |
|-----|-------|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |
13. If asked by a family member, would most staff members be more likely to say they really enjoy working here or that it was mainly a paycheck?
- | | SCORE |
|--------------|-------|
| Really enjoy | 1 |
| A paycheck | 2 |
14. If asked, would staff members say that the higher priority of the practice is patient satisfaction or revenue/profits?
- | | SCORE |
|----------------------|-------|
| Patient satisfaction | 1 |
| Revenue/profit | 2 |
15. If asked, would most staff members say they work at one of the best medical office in their community, or not?
- | | SCORE |
|-----|-------|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |
16. If asked, would most staff members say they have an important voice in how things are done in the office, or not?
- | | SCORE |
|-----|-------|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |
17. Does the office continuously solicit feedback from patients about their satisfaction with their office experience?
- | | SCORE |
|-----|-------|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |
18. Are performance metrics shared with staff monthly or more often?
- | | SCORE |
|-----|-------|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

19. Does a high level of cooperation and teamwork exist among staff members or is there a lot of inter-personal conflict?

	SCORE
Teamwork	1
Inter-personal conflict	2

TOTAL SCORE: _____