Complaints: Burdens or Opportunities?

View complaints as opportunities instead of burdens!

By John Pobanz

It is 3:30 in the afternoon on a Wednesday in January. Your orthodontic practice is humming along with every possible thing happening at the same time. Assistants are delivering care. The doctor is engaging a patient with friendly banter. The TCs are selling cases. The lab is cranking things out for the next day. The patient lounge isn’t too crowded, but several families are in the office with their kids during the after school rush. Suddenly, an outspoken patient mom storms through the door and pushes past someone scheduling an appointment. With a determined expression, she announces loud enough for all in the patient lounge to hear….”Whoever worked on my kid this morning totally roughed him up! He came out to the car hysterical! No one ever told me what went on, and I need an explanation.” The complaint. The scheduling coordinator is now on center stage, the entire room is waiting to see how she will respond. This situation can definitely be viewed as awkward, uncomfortable… even a burden. However, if she has been given the correct tools and training of complaint management, this situation is actually a golden opportunity.

According to a survey once conducted by Paul Zuelke, the top 10 complaints of orthodontic patients and referring doctors are:

10 Wait time
9 “She was too rough”
8 Limited after school hours
7 General lack of appointment availability
6 Bonding adhesive not removed
5 Second molars aren’t treated
4 Decalcification
3 Treatment time
2 “You look too busy”
1 Doctor is not available to talk to patients

Number 9, “She was too rough”, is the complaint of the moment. How will your scheduling coordinator perform in this situation? The following rules of complaint management can prepare any team member to shine in similar situations.

Turn the burden into an opportunity.
1. RESTATE THE CONCERN

With a calm, sincere facial expression, and while making direct eye contact with the individual; the team member should use careful language to obtain understanding of the situation and perhaps soften the initial complaint into something less abrasive. She should dial the intensity of the communication down a notch.

Empowered Communication
- “So you are saying, the procedure was difficult for Jared (always use the first name) to tolerate and perhaps the communication about the procedure wasn’t as good as it could have been?”
- “To make sure I understand……. Jared was upset that the task performed this morning was not as comfortable as his other visits… and you left feeling uninformed.”

2. SHOW EMPATHY

The person voicing a complaint craves to be heard and understood. They have a need for the listener to empathize. They need the listener to relate to the situation on a personal level in order for the anger to be completely defused.

Empowered Communication
- “As a mom, I understand why you are upset. If my child came out of any office with that reaction I would feel the same way.”
- “Your concern is justified… as parents we all just want our kids to be happy and we want to be informed.”

3. PROVIDE A SOLUTION

Now that the anger is gone. A solid solution that addresses the need but goes a little bit further than necessary is the best way to transition this situation from burden to opportunity. The wow factor is ready to be unleashed. Reacting in the moment is the key, but the goal should be to change the perception.

Empowered Communication
- “This is a situation that the doctor himself will definitely want to address immediately. If you have time, I can ask him to speak to you about this right now.”
- “If on the phone: Why don’t you come back in and I will arrange for the doctor to have some one on one time with you and Jared, double check that everything is perfect in his mouth so that he is comfortable for the weekend.”

The body language and posture of the defused complainer often softens. Some complainers start to get embarrassed. They often will step back a bit and suggest that the situation doesn’t require the doctor’s time. The scheduling coordinator who has truly brought her “A game” can then suggest that the patient’s needs are the priority and that the doctor would insist upon it.

4. PROBE FOR AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF RESOLUTION

Once the action or solution is agreed upon. It is important to ask:
- “Do you feel better about this situation now?”

The great complaint manager can then further maximize the opportunity by saying, “I feel better about it also” or simply “I do, too. I am so glad that you were willing to let us know how we can serve you and Jared better.” Forgiveness has been granted. All positive relationships require forgiveness in order to survive. This creates a sharing of the complaint from start to finish. The person’s problem is your problem; even if you perceive the problem differently than they do.

5. OVERKILL

Now the team must rally to completely extinguish the negativity and prevent it from happening again. A thorough chart entry is made. The next appointment is flagged for all to recognize the need to really deliver a perfect experience. The action of resolution is executed. The doctor meets the need but empowers both the teammate that managed the complaint as well as the teammate who was complained about.

Empowered Communication
- “The task we were performing in Jared’s mouth is a difficult one. It is very possible that he may have left feeling a bit jostled regardless of who had performed the task. I am fortunate to have such a great team that is able to manage these difficult situations with me.”

The complaining parent now has a perception that the entire team – including the team leader – will do whatever is necessary to maintain the relationship and meet the need. The same vocal individual that openly expresses a concern is often the same individual that will sing your praises in the community. Considering that 4% of disappointed customers will share a concern, while the other 96% silently endure and sometimes just seek out a different office; it seems appropriate to celebrate a complaint as an opportunity to create a raving fan.

Challenges: Create a laminated copy of these 5 steps to be located next to each phone in your practice. Role play the steps at your next team meeting. Incorporate these skills into your practice culture of empowered communication with ongoing role plays of different complaints you experience. View complaints as opportunities instead of burdens!