

Time to re-energise your practice?

Gaynor McIntyre offers five tips on getting your practice fit and ready to deal with every business challenge



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As specialist medical accountants we are finding that practices are struggling with fundamental management issues such as resource planning, increasing patient demand, what technologies to use and getting non-clinical staff to step up and take more responsibility.

While there are many external obstacles facing the profession – pending new contracts, an ongoing recruitment crisis and a lack of clarity as to how primary health will be funded – there are also areas practice managers can address now to ease the pressure and help steer their practice to a better work–life balance for all.

Here are five tips for re-energising you and your practice, and getting the business side of things fit and fully able to deal with anything that comes its way.

Take the practice's temperature

Imagine the practice is a person and ask how it would be feeling right now. If the answer is one or all of 'happy, well, calm and in control', no immediate action is needed. If the answer is along the lines of 'exhausted, weary, worn out, jaded or even terminally ill', this is the trigger that should spur you into action. Start by encouraging the GP partners to take

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a reality check and admit what is working for them and what's not. This is the time for them to get all the resentments and irritations out in the open. If they are honest with each other and with you as practice manager, you are off to a good start.

Run the numbers

Dig into your practice system and analyse some of the trends: patient demographics; how many patients you have who are classed as 'frequent flyers'; the percentage of the list with more than three long-term conditions and their attendance history; the number of appointments per GP/nurse/healthcare assistant by month; special prescription requests; and DNAs and cancellations.

Put all the results into table or graph format and look at a visual snapshot of the business. This is always a fascinating exercise. Are you using the wealth of information available to you and what are the trend lines telling you? The results will tell you what to do next.

Take full responsibility

Stop blaming others – the GPs that do not exist, the government, the health board or the clinical commissioning group. It is a waste of energy and does not serve any purpose. Millions of small businesses have just been through a major recession and many are still around; the GP market is just going through its own recession.

Remember, recessions are the universe's way of detoxing the market. Some businesses survive and others hit the wall. You need to persuade your GP partners to avoid the temptation to play the victim, take ownership for the business decisions they have made and need to make now and go for it.



Make some choices

You have looked at the numbers and mulled over the trends. Now, stand back, look at the practice, agree what you are wanting to achieve and paint a picture of the practice you want to be running. Ask yourself what you want rid of and what you want more of. Write it down, ideally as a formal plan with clear achievable targets defined, and consider all the options. Make some joint decisions around the priorities, allocate someone to lead each project and keep it simple.

Spring clean the practice

There will be some people working in your practice who are not doing the right tasks and you may also have some people sitting in the wrong seats doing the wrong tasks.

Regardless, this is the best way to re-energise and focus the practice. By simply re-organising roles and doing this in the context of improving the overall patient experience, you can literally shift the practice overnight. Unpacking all of the tasks required

to run each function you will be amazed at gaps in ownership or accountability. Often, we see disharmony between clinical and administrative functions, with an 'us and them' culture rife throughout the practice. Becoming fully functional erases this and pulls people together, with those who do not want to change usually selecting themselves out. Each individual can see how they contribute to the practice's success and performance starts to improve. Doctors focus their time with patients who need them and spend less time doing tasks that nurses or HCAs could be doing. Administrative staff reduce GP workload and capacity is released so they can do other things. The result is efficiency savings, the right people doing the right things, better patient care and a more harmonious working environment.

If your practice feels under the weather, you now know what to do. Just remember, doing something is better than nothing and, if you take your time to plan, you will reap the rewards in abundance. **PM**