



The Three Hats Of Practice

by Dr. Eric Huntington, DC

You want to build a strong, thriving practice. You're motivated and willing to work hard. You want to have a positive impact on your community. You're eager to take your practice to the next level. You are a great doctor, so why don't you have a line-up outside your door?

As most practicing doctors have learned, there is more to success than just being skilled, well intentioned and hard-working. In fact, your chances of success are greater if you're a poor clinician but a great business person rather than a great clinician but a poor business person. It's an unfortunate reality since it would seem fair and beneficial to our communities if the best clinicians were the busiest doctors...but that's not the case. To win as a doctor who owns his own practice, you must figure out how to deliver excellent patient care and be just as effective at expanding your business.

The confusion for many doctors as to how to accomplish this has led to all sorts of weird ideas, such as "doctors shouldn't sell," "if you just take care of your patients, the money will take care of itself," and so on. Consider, however, that any business is composed of various activities which together make up the functioning company. This is easy to see in a large business where there might be a

marketing department, a team of sales people, a production and/or service department, an HR department and an accounting department. But even a chiropractic practice with no employees has all those functions; the only difference is that they're all done by the doctor/owner. These various functions have natural divisions, such as reception duties, marketing, sales, doctor duties, et al, which can be considered "a job" in the practice. Of course, the larger the practice gets, the more you need to split up the job duties. Each of these individual sets of job duties can be called a "hat."

What Is A Hat?

Merriam-Webster's secondary definition is "an office, position, or role assumed by or as if by the wearing of a special hat" and derives from the railroad industry where each type of employee wears a different colored hat to designate his role. In a practice, hats refer to specific roles or functions, e.g. you may have someone posted as the receptionist whose duties – including answering calls, greeting people who walk in the door and routing people to the appropriate place in the office – fall under the "reception hat." Contrast this with the role of the doctor who treats the patients. That's the "doctor hat" which includes administration of exams, diagnostic testing, treatment and recordkeeping in patient files. In most small businesses, the hats/roles are not clearly defined and typically 1 or 2 key people wear all the important hats, and in some cases the owner does everything. The latter is a recipe for staying small, and possibly personal burnout.

How Many Hats Are You Wearing?

Running a successful practice requires you to serve simultaneously in at least 2 roles or to wear 2 hats: the chiropractic technical hat and the chiropractic business hat. Both must be worn for the business to prosper.

The chiropractic technical hat is the one you acquired from the years you've studied and practiced delivering chiropractic care. You began to learn this hat in chiropractic school and you've continued to refine it with continuing education and by working with patients in your office. The better you understand and apply this technical hat the better you serve your patients. That's the primary purpose of your business and your profession. Regrettably, I've known chiropractors who were great at the technical hat of delivering chiropractic care and yet they went out of business – and therefore can't help anyone with their incredible skill.

Now let's look at the chiropractic business hat, a hat that's essential for chiropractors who own their own businesses. This hat includes managing payroll, accounting, advertising, marketing, sales, staff development and training, expansion plans, compliance, goal setting, space and equipment decisions, adjusting staff work burdens, organizing the office and workflows...the list is

almost endless. For some chiropractors, the business hat may be comfortable to wear. You may recall spending long hours in college studying how to pick out the winner from 50 applicants for a position in your office? And learning how to keep staff motivated and really engaged so that they achieve maximum production? Not to mention that class on creating a marketing plan to effectively bring in new patients? And if you were lucky, there might have been a club on campus that covered some of those things, and maybe a book in the library, too.

The truth is: chiropractic school trained you on the chiropractic technical hat; the business part is pretty much an afterthought for many doctors. In fact, most doctors who open their own practices spend 100% of their time before they open their doors wearing the business hat for a few months. Then once they see their first few new patients, they spend more than 90% of their time wearing the technical hat, and from thereon-in serving a few patients each week. Thus, they're perpetually stuck in a small practice that experiences little growth and leaves them unsatisfied, both from a financial standpoint and in terms of purpose. It's hard to satiate the purpose to help others, not to mention earn much money, when your appointment schedule is half empty.

The 3 Legs Of A Healthy Business

For most of us, it's clear that 3 hats are essential to practice success. While there are many vital aspects to a practice, I've broken it down into 3 major hats that are essential for any business. These 3 hats are like the 3 legs of a stool which, if even in length, can provide the seat of the stool (the business) with balance, allowing it to perform its purpose.

The first leg, the chiropractic tech hat, encompasses the knowledge, skills and training required to administer chiropractic treatment. This hat includes all the clinical skills that you use to take care of your patients, i.e. the actual treatment of patients with adjustments, rehab techniques, nutrition and other modalities, and also encompasses your background training in biology, chemistry and physics, along with the clinical training that ties it all together. It also includes making decisions about patient care and completing necessary paperwork. In short, a massive hat, and vitally important to your practice. Most doctors have spent years developing the chiropractic tech hat and work at it daily, with few doctors lacking in terms of the technical aspect.

The second leg of the stool is the chiropractic business hat. This is the less obvious and often neglected, but equally vital (maybe even more so) hat for chiropractic success, entailing the knowledge and skills to build and manage the growth of your practice. Unless you did your undergraduate work in business management, marketing or economics, you probably don't have much formal business training. And even if you do have a university

degree in business, chances are that little of that information translates to real-world business success. For most doctors, their business knowhow comes from personal experience and/or chiropractic business seminars; with the average doctor spending maybe one weekend every 3 months in a seminar that equates to about 50 hours per year spent developing business knowledge. Frankly, that's not enough for most business owners to achieve any real success.

So how many hours does it take to become a chiropractor? Hundreds? Thousands? In the healthcare industry, the most successful chiropractors own their own business while the most successful medical physicians do not. The reality is that chiropractors must become adept at business management, which is nearly as important as the delivery of the chiropractic service. When you consider how much time you spend developing the chiropractic technical hat versus the amount of time you spend learning business, you'll begin to realize that you may have an underdeveloped ability to grow your practice.

The third leg of the stool is the sales hat. This hat could be considered part of the business hat, but sales is so important to any business that it really should be considered separately. What is the sales hat? It's all the knowledge, actions and job duties involved in helping patients fully understand their health condition and the doctor's recommendations; it also includes the process by which you help patients overcome the barriers which may otherwise prevent them from following through with your recommendations.

For many doctors, sales is uncomfortable, and maybe it's because many of us are uncomfortable with selling ourselves. Or maybe we have the erroneous idea that a doctor is not supposed to sell things? Such ideas may come from misunderstandings or personal experiences, e.g. perhaps someone once persuaded you to buy something which turned out to be a rip-off, or you let your own ethics slip and sold someone something they really didn't need. Both are examples of unethical sales. To be effective at sales in healthcare, you need to start with an ethical foundation. By "owning" your own personal ethics you can't fool yourself; you'll always know whether or not you're being ethical. You will never get ahead if you feel you're being dishonest, so it always pays to ensure you're ethical with your patients.

In the sale of healthcare there are 2 sides to ethics, one which might not be so obvious. First, you should always derive your recommendations while wearing your doctor hat. When doing this, you only prescribe precisely what you believe patients need to improve their health. And you're always completely honest in how you communicate to the patient regarding their condition and in answering any questions they may have. This is not only the right thing to do but it's also a fiduciary duty that you have in any doctor-patient relationship. A large majority

of doctors has this down pat; however, where I see more doctors slip up is in handling their patients in a different manner than they would a family member, close friend or some other person they really care about, resulting in sub-standard care. This is the classic soft-sell, i.e. if this doctor were communicating to a person they really cared about, they would be considerably more insistent in ensuring that the person follow through with their recommendation. Yet with their patients, this doctor allows them to walk out the door without really confronting the extent of their condition and what it will mean for their future – a



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tremendous disservice to the patient, and something that they would never allow to happen to a family member or friend. Many doctors have an ethical blind spot in this area, and have even justified their behavior by saying things like “Well, you can’t force a patient to do what’s right” or “You have to let people make decisions for themselves.” You can’t force people but if you are skilled at sales, you won’t be forcing the person, and they’ll make their own decision because it’s the right choice for them. If it’s somehow not the right choice, you might want to take a second look at your recommendation.

A proper sales cycle has one of two end results: either the patient starts care and follows through with the doctor’s recommendations or the patient leaves the office fully understanding their health condition and what they need to do to get healthy, along with a strong desire to over-

come whatever barrier is keeping them from being able to follow through that day. Maybe they need to talk to a spouse or come up with a financial solution to pay for the care or find another office because they live too far from your location. Each patient’s situation is a little different so your approach will vary from one person to another, but a fair barometer of how you should communicate with your patients would be: How would you deliver the recommendation to your (insert person you care about here)? My point is that most unethical behavior in sales actually comes from doctors being too soft-sell or timid to be honest with patients. Each patient deserves to be treated with the same level of care and commitment that you give to those in life who mean the most to you.

Once you deliver your recommendation to the patient, make sure they fully understand it. This is a vital part of sales. Healthcare terms and concepts are often complex for the average person so you must ensure they understand their current condition, how it will affect their future if left unhandled, and how your recommendation will help them get better. And if the patient really needs the care, you should firmly insist, in a polite manner, that they follow through with what you recommend. Being insistent is an attitude but it’s always done with compassion and understanding for the patient. If you find that you can’t persuade the patient to follow through, you should re-evaluate and revise your recommendation accordingly.

The 3 Hats Of Success These three hats, technical, business and sales, are equally important to practice success but the business hat has been absent from most practices for years. The evidence can be seen in 2 situations. Firstly, most practices are run like mom-and-pop shops, with the owner doing most of the important duties, and clear roles rarely defined for other employees. Secondly, most chiropractic practices disappear when the owner retires, evidence that it wasn’t really a business but rather a doctor who practiced there for a few decades. A sad fact, and detrimental to both the retiring doctor and the community losing the practice. The truth of chiropractic practice is that it requires all 3 hats (technical, business, and sales) to thrive. Giving equal attention to each of them, both in study and application, will move you to practice success.

How Well Organized Is Your Business?

1. Can you take 2 weeks’ vacation without disrupting your practice or your income? How about one week? What kind of arrangements would you have to make? What would happen to your business if you had to take time off, for a family emergency or to recover from sickness? Does your practice provide all the services you believe your patients need or do you cut financial corners? Have you ever thought about adding services that would complement your care only to discover you couldn’t afford them? Have you had to cut services because the numbers just weren’t adding up?

2. Do you have adequate cash reserves to cover 3 months of no income, in the event of an emergency or major strategic overhaul? What is that number for your practice? How much do you have in the bank? Is it growing or shrinking? What are your income projections?

3. Does your current income meet your needs or expectations? You've spent years building your career and your practice. Does that professional background and preparation provide you with the income you feel you deserve?

4. Are you pleased with the impact your practice is having on your community or do you envision something greater? Are you serving as a beacon to your community? What kind of legacy do you want to leave? Do you view your career and your practice as fulfilling a professional calling or is it just day-to-day drudgery, only to scrape up enough to get by? Would you abandon ship if you were provided a profitable out?

The answers can help you understand how much more attention you may need to give to the technical, business or sales hats. Maybe you know what needs to be done, and it's simply a matter of discipline. If you have trouble with that, just remember that it's a lot more fun to get your own discipline in place when things are still okay; it's not so much fun when things start crashing down around you.

It's possible that you feel unsure about how to effectively expand your practice, in which case you have 2 choices. You can try to learn by self-study, or you find someone who knows the business hat and can teach it to you. It's well worth noting that you can save much time and money by learning the business hat from someone who has already figured it out. If your goal is rapid and successful expansion, then this is the way to go.

The bottom line is that running a successful practice requires attention to all 3 hats: chiropractic technical, business, and sales. Doctors who invest in learning to improve each of these over the course of a career, and who put that knowledge to use, are able to take their practices to new levels. The strategies necessary to help you accomplish just about any practice goal are already known and available. You just need to find them and put them into action!

About The Author: Eric Huntington, DC, is president of the Chiropractic Business Academy (CBA), a chiropractic training and consulting group which, by teaching patient-centered business systems, helps chiropractors build stable and profitable practices. He was both the ICA representative for Maryland and a board member of the Maryland Chiropractic Association from 2002-2013, and he was on the executive committee of the ICA Best Practices and Practice Guidelines published in 2008. Dr. Huntington has owned, managed, bought and sold chiropractic and medical practices since 2001. Contact the CBA at 888-989-0855 or visit www.chirobizacademy.com.

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