



# How Patient Experience Leadership Will Shape Dentistry in The Coming Decade

A White Paper from DifferentKind

With insights from patient experience leaders at



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# Executive Summary

## 01 Patient experience leaders will be crucial for dental organizations in the coming decade

The consumerization of dental care, especially post-COVID, has led to an ever-increasing need for organizations to understand and act on patients' needs and desires. In order to properly prioritize this, organizations should have leaders dedicated to ensuring the patient voice is heard.

## 02 When measuring patient experience, the quality of questions you ask determines the quality of results you receive

While NPS is becoming more commonly measured in dental settings, it can't be the only question asked to determine patient experience. Organizations need to understand end-to-end patient journeys; this requires asking about specific points along those journeys to understand strengths and highlight pain points.

## 03 Patient experience and team/employee experience are inextricably linked

The best patient experience leaders can build strategies to prioritize patient experience, but clinicians and other team members must be able to execute those strategies in a positive and engaging manner. Leaders need to focus on both patient and employee voices to maximize their efforts.

## 04 The future of patient loyalty and trust lies in experience measurement, management, and improvement

Organizations looking to improve their bottom line must start with a concerted effort to listen and respond to patients and employees. Having a dedicated patient experience leader is a crucial piece of this strategy.

Section **01**

# What is patient experience?



As defined by the Beryl Institute, a leading non-profit committed to improving patient experience, patient experience (PX) is “the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization's culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care.”<sup>1</sup>

**There are a few key points we can highlight from this definition:**

- 01 PX is the sum of all interactions** - Every team member is a critical part of the patient experience. From a first touchpoint on the phone to a recall reminder via email to a dental assistant taking x-rays during an exam, everyone has a role to play in ensuring that patients have an overall experience where they are safe, cared for, and partnered with in a seamless way. In this way, patient and employee experience are inextricably linked.
- 02 PX is shaped by an organization's culture** - As just noted, patient experience can not be extricated from team experience, that is, if your staff is happy, your patients will often be happy (and vice versa). How an organization's leadership team communicates and operationalizes its mission, vision, and values is critical to ensuring that patients come back again and again.
- 03 PX influences patient perceptions** - Patient experience is generally understood to be what happens, not how a patient feels about it (which is patient satisfaction). But, obviously, if it's empirically evident that a patient was, for example, treated with care and respect, this will influence their perception of the care.
- 04 PX exists across the continuum of care** - Patient experience is not limited to how a patient finds a dentist online, how they book an appointment, or the ability to text with a care team member (though those are all parts of patient experience). Organizations looking to optimize patient experience must have leadership roles within their structure to focus solely on this end-to-end understanding and action.

<sup>1</sup> “Defining Patient and Human Experience.” The Beryl Institute: Defining Patient and Human Experience, <https://theberylinstitute.org/defining-patient-experience/>. Accessed 30 June 2023.



## Section 02

# Why are patient experience leaders important in dental settings?

Many dental leaders have never heard the title CXO - Chief Experience Officer. This is about to change as the industry recognizes the trend that has been obvious in medical settings for the last decade - patient experience leaders are a crucial part of a thriving healthcare organization. For this white paper, we interviewed patient experience leaders at dental organizations of various sizes, from enterprise DSOs to solo private practice offices. The participants included Andrew Gordon, Chief Experience Officer at Open Door Family Dentistry (<https://www.opendoordental.com/>), Tina Forward, CPXP, Patient Experience and Leadership Coach at Mortenson Dental Partners (<https://mortensondentalpartners.com/>), Matthew Marrero, Patient Experience Coordinator at Underbite Management (<https://www.myunderbite.com/>), Nicolle von Helms, Head of People Experience at The Dental Studio (<https://www.thedentalstudio.com/>), and Dana Wade, Patient Experience Officer at SGA Dental Partners (<https://sgadental.com/>). Their perspectives and voices are highlighted throughout the remainder of this paper.

A key learning from our conversations with patient experience leaders was the idea that to do well as a business you have to do well by people - both patients and employees. As Tina Forward put it, "(A focus on patient experience) keeps people aligned with the fact that it's not just about making a profit; it's about caring for and changing the lives of everyone. That really does resonate with most of our team members." A double (and triple) bottom line is possible when organizations ensure leadership conversations include people whose role is to speak for what patients want and need.

It is also interesting that several of the patient experience leaders we spoke to didn't have dental backgrounds, but came from customer-facing roles in other industries like banking and hospitality. Andrew Gordon, CXO at Open Door Family Dentistry, put the genesis of his role this way, "What if one of us on the executive team was just purely responsible for the patient's experience and being the voice on the executive team that says "It might work financially, operationally, it may work clinically, but I don't think that works for the patients. Being a non-clinician, a person who comes from a non-clinical background having a background in customer service, it made a lot of sense for me to step into that role. It's just those different thought processes that start to put the patient experience top of mind and especially in that room where decisions are being made."



Section **03**

# 3 Key Focus Areas For The Next Decade From The Perspective of Patient Experience Leaders

When measuring patient experience, the quality of questions you ask determines the quality of results you receive

One of the key roles of a patient experience leader is to measure patient experience. This generally involves asking patients for feedback (not just Google Reviews or NPS<sup>2</sup>), which helps leaders understand where patient pain points exist - and how to solve them - and where organizations are already doing well - and how to double down in these areas. As Nicolle von Helms of The Dental Studio put it, "I think patients need guidance (when asking them for feedback) because open-ended questions can be so daunting, especially if it's feedback of a constructive nature. So, trying to help them get there to really understand what they want to convey is key. In turn, this helps establish trust and will only further develop your relationship. You want them to know you truly mean it when you ask for their feedback!"



Relying on public reviews or just NPS really limits the context in which you receive patient feedback. You see more of the extremes on both ends. You don't see what the overwhelming majority of your patients, the ones in the middle, are thinking.

**- Matthew Marrero, Patient Experience Coordinator, Underbite Dental Management**

If you're just starting out in measuring and improving patient experience, you can learn from the experience of these leaders. While one metric may seem like a good place to start, you quickly move to wanting (and needing) to understand the complexity of the patient journey more fully. Tina Forward shared, "We would like to have something that goes a little more granular than just the NPS results, as proud as we are of them. We know that there are just a couple of questions that patients are asked and so we want to be able to dig a little deeper"



## Practical application:

Your patient experience measurement solution should give you more data than one NPS question.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dentistrytoday.com/patient-experience-more-than-nps-or-google-reviews/>

## Patient experience and team/employee experience are inextricably linked

You probably won't be surprised to learn that patient experience is directly related to employee experience, and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> As a patient experience officer at a hospital in the UK put it, "Happy staff don't necessarily make happy patients. But unhappy staff will never make good patient experience. So I think if you're just going to work on patient experience, you are going to make your job twice as hard. I think you'll get there, but it's going to be harder. If you can get the staff engaged and come in with you then you're halfway there."<sup>4</sup> This sentiment was wholeheartedly supported by the oral health experience leaders we talked with. Matthew Marrero noted, "We have open lines of communication with each other. We're able to bring patient feedback directly to each department and tie together operations and patient experience in a way that puts us all on the same page so we can meet our goals together. The patient experience department is also more of a support department. Meaning that instead of telling staff what we need from them, we approach it more as finding opportunities to provide additional support to staff so we can all deliver exceptional patient experience."



Every aspect of interaction matters, even beyond direct communication with patients. For example, they (patients) can feel tension between employees, which is why our job should be focused on people experience as a whole. A truly organic and positive experience happens when all parties/elements are given the attention and care they deserve.

**- Nicolle von Helms, Head of People Experience, The Dental Studio**

The interconnectedness of patient and employee experience is summed up well by Matthew Marrero. "Having a flow in the office where everything is aligned from front to back is the biggest confidence booster for patients." And as Dana Wade of SGA Dental Partners notes, you can't deliver an exceptional patient experience without exceptional employees who trust the organization and each other. "In every practice, it's important to remember that every team member plays a role in delivering an exceptional patient experience. With each touchpoint to the quality of care and follow-up, every interaction contributes to building relationships and trust. Which in turn increases case acceptance, patient referrals, and satisfied loyal patients."



### Practical application:

Measuring and improving the employee experience is just as important as measuring and improving the patient experience. Once or twice a year satisfaction surveys are not enough to really understand and act on the employee voice.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8808385/>

<sup>4</sup> Locock L, Graham C, King J, et al. Understanding how front-line staff use patient experience data for service improvement: an exploratory case study evaluation. Southampton (UK): NIHR Journals Library; 2020 Mar. (Health Services and Delivery Research, No. 8.13.) Chapter 7, Improving staff experience. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK554752/>

## The future of patient loyalty and trust lies in experience leadership, measurement, management, and improvement

For organizations looking to propel same-store growth, patient experience leadership is a crucial factor. Organizations that have a formal CXO role are more likely to be recommended by patients and are more likely to receive higher patient ratings in general.<sup>5</sup> Tina Forward highlighted this, saying, “Patients have a choice of where they obtain their dental care so the differentiator is truly how they’re treated when they’re in the practice. With all of the knowledge and skills that dentists obtain in dental school, they don’t always learn how to effectively communicate with patients. It’s critical to have someone who can provide and reinforce that additional training to help our providers avoid becoming so routine that they’re only focused on their clinical skills.”



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**- Andrew Gordon, Chief Experience Officer, Open Door Family Dentistry**

A true focus on patient experience, as well as employee experience, is best achieved through role-specific leadership in this area. Having a good organizational culture can help, but culture alone likely won’t be enough to drive success without true ownership. As Matthew Marrero notes, “If you create a patient experience role in your practice, you have to start with KPIs and knowing what you want to track. Set that person up for success by having set improvement goals and metrics that can truly be tracked over time. That role should really be able to make an impact on the practice, but it starts with knowing what you need to improve.”



### Practical application:

Organizations should create patient experience leadership roles (Chief Experience Officer, Director of Patient Experience, etc.) to effectively measure, manage, and improve patient and employee experience.

<sup>5</sup> Breen W, Choi S, Hearld K, O'Connor SJ, Rafalski E, Borkowski N. The association between an established Chief Experience Officer role and hospital patient experience scores. *Patient Experience Journal*. 2021; 8(1):69-76. doi: 10.35680/2372-0247.1508.



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I am very excited about partnering with DifferentKind. Measuring the patient experience will be so beneficial to our organization. It will assist us in understanding how our patients feel about our providers and how we can build training to improve in the areas we may be struggling in.

*- Dana Wade, Patient Experience Officer, SGA Dental Partners*





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