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Is it possible to create a great team culture in a multi-site hand therapy clinic?

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We spend a large part of our day and life at work. Many of us spend more time with our colleagues than our friends or families. How we feel at work matters to our enjoyment of our careers and our life. Work is a place of great learning, achievement, and fulfilment. It's important to have a great work environment because it's such a big part of living a happy, satisfying life.



When I began as a clinic owner 30 years ago, I didn't have any business skills at all. I was driven by a desire to simply provide the best hand therapy to my clients. Melbourne Hand Rehab now has 33 team members across 12 sites (7 stand-alone clinics, four post-op clinics and one satellite clinic), and I have had to learn a lot of skills along the way. We have grown slowly and steadily year upon year, this past year included. Our NPS or net promoter score at the height of the pandemic was 95 and sits consistently in the 90s. This is reflective of how well our team looks after our clients. I've learned from my own mistakes, and I've invested heavily in my own development, primarily in the form of great mentors. I've also learnt a lot from poor workplace cultures and the devastating effects this can have on an individual.

Many people have asked me how I manage such a large team across multiple sites. While there is no simple answer to this question, I would say that I work hard to maintain clinical standards, know the numbers, refine the systems, and pay attention to marketing. The key element has been getting the culture right, and I feel this is the ultimate outcome of my leadership journey.

We all know how hard it's been over the past 18 months, and it has been a true test for everyone down here in Melbourne. Here are some of the things we have been doing at Melbourne Hand Rehab to keep it together during the world's longest lockdown.

Right from the start of the pandemic, we began holding all in-team get-togethers that we called Town Hall meetings as a forum to navigate our fears and feelings. We discussed the business reality of lockdown, and we made decisions about how we would approach the multiple challenges as a team. We built on our previous resilience training to openly discuss the mental health issues we were facing and those of our clients. We have been practising gratitude, mindfulness, and service to others as a response to our situation, and we committed to communicating as much as possible.

We connected in the most personal way we could. We made a lot of phone calls, sent a lot of cards, video messages, emails and posted a lot of social content to support each other, our clients, and the business.

We recognised the importance of giving back in the service of others. We researched and created free webinars on how to self-manage four common conditions when we had capacity in our diary. We upskilled in our presentation skills, and we now run these continuously and plan to continue post-COVID.

Early on, we also did fun things like gifts to team members' families, such as easter egg hunt kits and other little cards and presents of thanks to each other.

As our lockdown here in Melbourne ran from weeks into months, we all felt weary at certain times. I realised then that we had to do more self-care, and so we started Workout Tuesdays, where we all down tools at midday and do a group workout on Zoom. We decided to wear our exercise gear to work on Tuesdays to role model good health and exercise behaviour to our clients, but mostly to be super comfy at work.

Within the confines of group restrictions, we cooked up other ways to enjoy each other. We did fun stuff like having a comedian drop into our team meeting with songs to make us laugh (and cry a bit). We had a memorable zoom cooking night where we learnt how to cook traditional Russian dumplings from scratch (Pelmeni) according to one of our team's grandma's recipes.

More recently, we have implemented an Employee Assistance Program to provide company-paid, anonymous counselling for all employees and their immediate families. I recognised that we all needed access to professional help as parents juggled homeschooling, relationship stress due to the prolonged lockdown, social isolation, partner job loss and general weariness.

We have also embarked upon a whole team Accidental Counsellor training program. Our communities are stressed and behaving differently due to the lengthy period of isolation and fears associated with the pandemic. It became apparent we needed to upskill in managing our own emotions around this situation and learn how best to respond in the moment. Some clients behaved aggressively towards the admin team regarding PPE or waiting in the car, and others expressed significant mental health deterioration during their consultations. We needed to handle these situations professionally and manage the feelings that this brought up in ourselves.

Looking back over everything that's happened, it's amazing to see how the team has pulled together. It didn't begin that way though, we had to commit to a few guiding principles.

This is how we began to create an enjoyable work environment across our sites:

1. We committed to communicating often.

We use slack as our communication platform. We have a Culture Club, and a WINS! channel, which we use to recognise our team's amazing work, and everyone is involved in this. We post feedback from our clients on WINS! to acknowledge our peers. We get to know each other on Culture Club. We post when people go above and beyond or do something that demonstrates our team values. One of our latest culture club posts received some very enlightening responses when we asked, "Tell me about something interesting you have done."

It's magic because it happens every day, and it's inspiring.

2. Be honest with your team.

I've learned to be vulnerable with my team. When the pandemic hit, I opened the books and provided complete transparency on the financial reality of the business. This helped inform our team's approach and action plan in the early days.

I was honest when I found myself hitting a low point about 12 months in. I was surprised by how many of the team sent me heartwarming messages of support and did lovely check-ins in the days and weeks after this. The support I received truly bolstered me, and I found it very moving.

3. Look after yourself / Get a mentor.

As a business owner, it all starts with you. I take care of myself by investing in my health and wellness. I do a lot of physical exercise, and I have a professional mentor to hold me accountable and support me with challenges. I emulate the notion of just being yourself at work. It's exhausting trying to be on your best professional behaviour all the time, and so I encourage people just to be themselves. There's a big difference between being happy and being positive. It can be a lot of pressure to try and be happy or bubbly all day and quite unnatural for many people.

4. Schedule a rhythm of connection

We have a regular rhythm of team touchpoints as we are spread across multiple sites. I meet with the admin team once a week on google meet, which provides a forum for feedback and our continual improvement. We have monthly seminars and skills sessions as well as 30 minutes one on one mentoring sessions. I mentor the senior team, and they mentor their team members. We have a fortnightly case study with the younger team members and a monthly mastermind for the senior team.

We also have twice-yearly culture (half) days where we close the clinic and spend the time together on a certain topic and cap it off with a social event or activity. This might include some team bonding, a work topic to discuss, brainstorming and achievable actions you decide on as a team. Our last culture day was on the new client experience, and upcoming, we have our Accidental Counsellor training.

Before the pandemic, we held company-paid social get-togethers, with favourites being comedy nights, brunches, and regular dinners. I'm looking forward to resuming those things.

"There is no magic formula for great company culture. The key is just to treat your staff how you would like to be treated." Richard Branson, Founder of Virgin Group.

Company culture can be defined as a set of shared values, goals, attitudes, and practices that characterise an organisation. At Melbourne Hand Rehab our values are ingrained in our team communications and systemised mentoring sessions. We are committed to creating great value for ourselves in our own careers and great value for our clients and the company. When we get those things right, we're on our way to achieving our goals. Practising our shared values brings us together as a team and gives us an identity of which we can be proud.

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