

Practice Profile **Vance Thompson Vision**

Let My People Glow

The contagious part of creating an amazing experience for the customer and the team.

BY MATT JENSEN

Every organization has a structure that comprises how it accomplishes its tasks, how it engages its employees, and the type of managerial style used. Many businesses, including ophthalmology practices, use such structures to perform their day-to-day operations. Although it may not be intentional, a style eventually surfaces. There is the Matrix model, the Hierarchical model, the Flat model, and the Militaristic model to name just a few. If I had to choose an organizational model to apply to Vance Thompson Vision, a refractive and cataract center located in the US plains, I might label it the Group Hug model.

As a child, the life's goal of Vance Thompson, MD, was simply to move to Sioux Falls someday and maybe drive a Chevrolet Suburban. He has handily achieved this and much more. In the past few years, his practice has added two surgeons, two optometrists, and numerous other staff positions. The practice offers world-class education to optometrists, has adopted new measurement devices for its team, and manages all of its own internal and external marketing. The achievement of these milestones has not interrupted a steady volume of refractive surgery or slowed an increase in the number of premium IOLs implanted. At the end of most days, however, Dr. Thompson can be seen fleeing the largest city in South Dakota in his 10-year-old Suburban for more open country, near Gregory (population 4,084), where his dogs can run and pheasants shudder with fear. He views his life in simple terms. Those who meet him quickly learn that his humble style and hominess are infectious and serve to brighten the mundane.

MAIN STREET ATTITUDE

The small town, Main Street attitude is not only built into who Dr. Thompson is. It is also central to each member of the Vance Thompson Vision team, most of whom come from small, Midwestern farming towns.

Dr. Thompson is no longer the sole surgeon at Vance



Thompson Vision, and he certainly believes that he is not the only leader. "We have created the kind of culture here where we really understand what drives each other," he says. "We have to keep everything in balance. The practice needs to be more than just better for me; it needs to be better for the team and their families, too."

"That is one of the major reasons I decided to partner with Vance," says Alison Tandler, MD, a refractive and cataract surgeon with the practice. "We are not just about performing great surgery. That's the easy part. We create better, more balanced lives for our patients and our team. Simply put, life is better being a part of this practice than it would be if we were not all together."

REFRACTIVE SURGERY FINANCING OPTIONS

Offering financing options to patients removes a barrier to cost and adds to the value of their experience. Many patients, affluent or otherwise, take advantage of no-interest payment plans, because such plans allow them to control and manage discretionary dollars and monthly cash flow. At Vance Thompson Vision, the majority of LASIK patients who use financing own homes and have annual incomes of more than \$100,000.

CHARACTER TRAITS

One of the most important traits of a good leader is his or her ability to recruit top-notch talent. At Vance Thompson Vision, we have approached this task in unconventional ways. While many centers struggle to find ophthalmic technicians with experience, for example, we focus on the human interactions with candidates. "How [they] treated the front desk staff is far more important than if they can refract," says John Berdahl, MD, another refractive and cataract surgeon at the center. "The people who work here are the type who sent cookies with their résumé and wrote a thank you note afterward. They are different from people everywhere else."

The practice's personnel have diverse backgrounds. Some came from the hotel and hospitality industry, some from the financial sector, and some from the marketing world. Others began in more formal health care settings. All share a common characteristic, however: they are in tune with the customer.

"One of our philosophies is to recruit talented individuals who naturally adhere to these core values, because those characteristics—unlike a knowledge of ophthalmology—are difficult to teach," Dr. Thompson says. "The key is to provide a working environment that nurtures these core values. The benefit of defining our team's core values is that it gets everyone moving in the same direction. More importantly, it puts premium patient care where it belongs—at the point of service."

CONTINUING EDUCATION

In addition to finding talent, Vance Thompson Vision invests heavily in rounding out team members' abilities, both technical and the so-called soft skills. Continuing education is constantly supported, and regular retreats are held with some of the county's most accomplished thought leaders from various industries. In addition, daily and weekly spot checks are held in the form of "huddles" and meetings where there is ongoing tweaking of operations and the standards for the customer's experience. The team shares a simple belief and desire to treat patients in a world-class manner.

The talent and dedication that differentiate the practice's surgical team are shared by the optometrists, receptionists, coders, managers, technicians, and nurses. Their commitment to patients' care is communicated by each of these team members in a harmonious fashion.

LANDMARKS

During the past 2 decades, several developments have set Vance Thompson Vision apart from other practices. The first is the advancement of technology. Obviously, the excimer laser's FDA clinical trials and the adoption of laser vision correction were central in defining the future of Vance Thompson Vision. Moreover, it gave the center's physicians and staff a mindset of being quick to adopt new technology. When femtosecond technology for the creation of the corneal flap became available in 2001, the practice was an early adopter. "Rapid adoption of proven technology has served to keep us out front, while endearing us to the providers who send their patients to us," says Dr. Thompson. "Referring physicians know that, if there is an advancement of significance, we've got it." Over the years, the center has participated in 30 FDA-monitored clinical trials.

Offering the latest technology to patients has also allowed the center to refrain from pricing wars. By offering what no other center has, pricing becomes a more neutral factor than without that differentiation. Price is and will always remain a barrier to refractive growth, however, so the use of easy payment options, for example, remains central to the success of a growing refractive surgery practice (see *Refractive Surgery Financing Options*).

CONCLUSION

What makes a practice successful may not keep it so. For this little center on the plains, however, what has made it successful is the foundation of what will carry it in the future. We remain committed to adopting new technologies in laser and implant surgery that create a real benefit for patients. We will also continue meeting together often, as if a family, to consistently stage experiences for our customers that are worth the price of entry. The future is bright—for the doctors, the team, and our patients. ■

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Suggested reading:
Young Ophthalmologists: Three ways to foster an inviting office culture. <http://www.ao.org/yo/newsletter/200902/article02.cfm>. Accessed December 17, 2009.