



Jorge Garcia-Zuazaga, MD, and his staff at Apex Dermatology in northeast Ohio.

Fostering Future Leaders in Dermatology

A practice in northeastern Ohio invested in mentoring physicians, and is reaping the benefits. Here is what they did, and what your practice can learn from it.

Jill Waldbieser, Managing Editor

Running a successful dermatology practice in the current healthcare climate is challenging, to say the least, but by all accounts, Jorge Garcia-Zuazaga, MD, was excelling at it in 2013. His practice, Apex Dermatology in northeast Ohio, had three locations and all were thriving. But growth brought its own challenges, and Garcia-Zuazaga, a former Navy flight surgeon with an MBA from Case Western University, felt there was only one way to overcome those challenges: Think like a CEO.

“In the midst of complete and total industry disruption, holding on to the status quo is rarely effective,” said Rick Simmons, co-founder and CEO of the telos institute, a global organiza-

tional consulting firm based in Cleveland, Ohio. “Jorge saw that happening, and he didn’t sit on his hands, he got ready for it. He has a bent toward continuous improvement, and he was really devoted to providing opportunities for members of his team to grow as well.”

Dr Garcia-Zuazaga reached out to the telos institute to implement leadership programming into all his practices, and in nearly eight years, Apex has experienced tremendous growth, with more than 100 employees and 15 providers in seven locations. Retention rates are high, burnout is low, and patients are happy. He credits all this success to cultivating great leadership skills—both in himself, and in others.



Jorge Garcia-Zuazaga, MD, wanted to promote future leaders in his dermatology practice, Apex Dermatology in northeastern Ohio.

The Leadership Deficit

The days when doctors could hang their shingle and practice quietly until retirement are long gone, but education and training have not kept pace with the current need for leadership skills. “Dermatology is very fragmented, and healthcare is constantly changing. To be successful in medicine nowadays, you need to be part of a solid group with solid leadership,” said Dr Garcia-Zuazaga. Medical school, he pointed out, does not always prepare doctors for those aspects of the job. “By the time you get to be a dermatologist, you’re a pretty smart person. But you might not necessarily know how to lead people. Many doctors have never led a group, never had to hire or fire anyone, never had to coach anyone for improvement.”

Dr Garcia-Zuazaga developed many of those skills during his military training. “As a naval officer, you get put in situations where you have to make decisions that affect a lot of people,” he said. “You learn how to motivate people, and how to set high standards for yourself and your group.”

He sees his role as a doctor and physician-owner in a similar light. “When you’re a physician, your name is on the door, but you are also part of a team. A very important part, but still part of a team.” Embracing that attitude, he says, makes for a high-performing practice, where everyone remains motivated, happy, and actively involved. “That is what drives the patient experience, which in the end is what makes you successful,” Dr Garcia-Zuazaga said. “That’s the secret sauce.”

First Steps

People call the telos institute when they are at what Simmons calls “a key point of inflection.” Dr Garcia-Zuazaga was at such a point. When a mutual friend introduced them, the doctor proposed

some kind of leadership training for his staff. His thinking was, “Motivate your team, and they will help you achieve your goals.”

First on the agenda was crafting a mission statement that clearly spelled out the core values of the group. The doctor was adamant that all his team members be involved in the creation of this foundational document. “If you feel like you are part of something bigger, it is always more meaningful to come to work,” he said. “We’re not just doing dermatology, we’re really transforming people’s lives. When you walk out our door, and you are skin cancer- or acne-free, that’s very powerful.”

A mission statement will also help inform a practice’s culture, or the way people in the organization are expected to behave. “If you have the right culture, patients will get the best care,” said Dr Garcia-Zuazaga. A big part of Apex’s culture is teamwork and transparency. For annual performance reviews, the group took a cue from major corporations and uses a 360-degree evaluation model where employees are rated based on feedback. Not only from their direct managers, but subordinates and peers as well. Doing so, Dr Garcia-Zuazaga says, allows him to better identify how the team works together, and individual strengths and weaknesses.

“In a lot of big groups, there’s no ownership,” he said. “You would be surprised how many doctors don’t share something as simple as how many patients they want to see in a day with their team. When you are transparent with expectations and share them with your team, they will try to meet them.”

Building on Success

From there, Dr Garcia-Zuazaga worked with the telos institute to develop professional development programming for physicians and key people in upper management—“Anyone who has potential for leadership,” he said. “Every three or four months we would meet and tackle issues that would help make the practice



Rick Simmons, co-founder and CEO of the telos institute, a global organizational consulting firm based in Cleveland, Ohio.



Dr Garcia-Zuazaga believed his training as a former Navy flight surgeon helped him build leadership and teamwork skills.

better," he said. Topics ranged from budgeting conflict management. "Not everybody is a natural leader but what we did made people more comfortable opening up that way and interacting in the group. As a consequence, it makes the practice better."

The sessions were voluntary, but structured in such a way that participants could learn from each other, said Simmons. Often, meetings would take the form of a roundtable, although some occasionally incorporated teambuilding activities like an Escape Room. "That way, everyone built bonds among themselves," he said. "The relationship between any practitioner and patient is a team, a partnership. It is completely different from the transactional relationships of the past. Apex is an early adapter in this respect."

Programming focused on what Simmons calls "hard skills" and "soft skills." "Just because you went to med school doesn't mean you have a full understanding of the ramifications of running a practice," he said. "Lead physicians are quasi business owners. You have to be able to analyze and have a working understanding of the metrics that drive a business." Those skills are what he characterized as "hard skills"; "soft skills" involve how to communicate effectively, build a team, and make effective decisions.

Those initial training sessions were so well-received, Dr Garcia-Zuazaga and the telos institute decided to expand the program. The Apex Physician Leadership Institute will launch late this year, after the practice's newest team members have been onboarded. The goals are threefold, says Simmons: (1) Keeping physician leaders on a track of continuous improvement; (2) helping build skillsets necessary to be a leader at Apex and in the industry; and (3) creating opportunities for participants to pay it forward, say, to their office care team or finance team.

"It is an investment, but we're investing in the group," said Dr Garcia-Zuazaga. "As we've grown, sometimes we use that as a re-

cruitment tool. Most people appreciate this kind of opportunity for development."

"There is a hunger from healthcare practitioners to continuously improve," agreed Simmons. "We can convince ourselves that continuous improvement is out of our reach, but it is within everyone's reach. I would say, start small. You don't have to build the Apex Physician Leadership Institute. That's not what Jorge started out intending to do."

Though Dr Garcia-Zuazaga offers advice to dermatologist looking to institute similar programming (**see Five Things Every Leader Needs to Know**), his definition of leadership is quite simple: helping align people with their goals so they can achieve what they want to achieve. "As a leader, you have to make some strong decisions, but ultimately it's about helping your team achieve," he says. "If I can make you better, I'm doing my job." ■

Five Things Every Leader Needs to Know

Dr Garcia-Zuazaga offers this advice to anyone wanting to follow in his footsteps.

1. Make sure your heart is in it.

If you are not personally passionate about it, it is going to be a waste of time.

2. Enlist a pro.

At least one. Dr Garcia-Zuazaga began assembling a team of advisors when his practice started to grow. It's how he was eventually introduced to the telos institute. Executive coaches can offer professional opinions on subjects in which you may not be as well-versed.

3. Get your staff's buy-in.

Involving your team early on makes them stakeholders in the whole process. You'll be surprised how many people are thirsty for this kind of career development, says Dr Garcia-Zuazaga. It can also help get things rolling if you have a champion within the organization.

4. Understand that you can't please everybody.

Some doctors enjoy this aspect of their jobs. Some say, "I went to medical school, not business school," and are happy to just be doctors. You can be flexible, but ultimately this has to be a voluntary program.

5. Know that it's always a work in progress.

You learn as you go, and being flexible is key. Maybe you will discover that early breakfast meetings get more participation than evening meetings. Try it on the small scale and tailor your results accordingly. The more you do it, the more you learn how to do it.