

## **How do I get to the next level of productivity, profitability and value?**

Do you ever here colleagues say things like, “I keep working harder, but I’m making less than I used to”, or “My practice is really busy but I’m not that profitable”, or “I just don’t know how to take my practice up from here”? I hear these comments all the time and I see what makes the difference between these “stuck” practitioners and those who are going to the next level.

The model of practice commonly seen in dentistry revolves around seeing more and more patients at UCR fees until you reach capacity. Then, you raise fees annually to keep up with inflation and call that “growth” in your practice. Unfortunately, true inflation often exceeds the rise in UCR fees and you may not be able to work any faster. So how do you go to the next level in your practice? How can you be more profitable with less patient treatment hours and less stress while realizing more satisfaction from your work? The answer lies in recognizing the existence of a separate and complementary model of practice. I’ll call our first model, the one described above, the “excellence” model of practice. It depends on excellent clinical skills, pain control methods, office systems, time and motion efficiencies and patient education. It is the important foundational format that is necessary to create a busy transactional practice. It is the standard, default, model that is used in the early stages of our practices. It falls off in effectiveness as we reach our physical limits of capacity. The complementary model that is influential in “going to the next level”, that has the potential to move us beyond the UCR limitations and enable us to attain higher levels of success I’ll call the “leadership” model. It depends on your ability to be a true leader of people. Do you really “lead” your team and patients? What does that mean?

Who hasn’t wondered why there is such a wide variation of perceived success in the practice of general dentistry? We all know the colleague who doesn’t appear to have the latest technology or the most up to date office that is happy, solvent and self-fulfilled. On the other hand the opposite is often observed. A dentist, who has taken every continuing education course, has an office full of high tech gadgets and never seems satisfied with the quality of life that his profession is delivering or is not able to reach financial security. We even see highly trained dentists who are struggling to make ends meet, can’t provide the extra salary and perks that can attract and keep that exemplary office team and/or fully fund his or her retirement plan. It is true that happiness and self-fulfillment are not dependent on money, but, for most of us, it is an important barometer of how we feel about our chosen work and our self esteem. When I graduated from dental school

I was so excited about setting up my practice. Even though I had all that school debt, I knew that I was private practice material. I was well trained so I thought that all I had to do was build that new office, find the right employees and I'd be an instant success. I would be the captain of my ship. I would bark commands and the mates would heave to and we would fly with the wind. Several years and not much reduction of debt later, I began to think that maybe I was just full of hot air, that maybe I should do something different. However, I didn't really know what that was.

## **WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE?**

What is it that creates the difference between the average or standard solo dental practice experience and the exemplary high performance practice that we see excel into the multimillion dollar solo private practice? I believe that one word describes the phenomena that we see and one word alone, leadership. Webster defines "to lead" as "to show the way for", or "to go or make go in some direction", or "to be at the head of or be first." Some people develop leadership style almost naturally. Whether they are born with it or are exposed to an environment that fosters a leadership style, it just seems to be comfortable for them. The rest of us aren't as fortunate. The good news is that many of the skills that contribute to a style that is associated with good leaders can be learned, practiced and perfected deliberately.

## **WHAT MAKES A GOOD LEADER?**

Those who we would define as leaders are able to communicate a vision of life, work, some endeavor, so clearly that people are literally able to see where they are going. The leader emits a sense of stability that is welcomed by those who are exposed to it. Through an ability to instill trust and confidence the leader draws people to them like bees to honey. This individual will have credibility by virtue of being ethically and morally focused. The ability to demonstrate their values and sway people's beliefs is a critical skill that stems from their passion, energy and commitment for whatever they believe in. The leader does not send mixed messages. Their word is their bond. If they tell you that something will happen, you can go to the bank on it.

So what does being a leader have to do with having a successful highly lucrative practice? Everything! I believe that it is rare that a doctor is so notable for their clinical prowess that they can have an envious practice without a team of employees who fully believe in them and a set of patients and/or referrals who have confidence in them. A very small percentage of doctors have recognition and subsequent success by clinical reputation alone. Most of us, however, must rely on our behavioral skills to take our practice to the next level. Vision, influence, passion, integrity and our ability to communicate in a way that is memorable and persuasive are the assets that set us apart.

## **RESONANT LEADERSHIP**

They are also the key ingredients in what is known as resonant leadership. Resonant leaders are followed because people want to be lead by them. This is contrasted against dissonant leaders

who lead primarily by force of will, intimidation and/or coercion. The dissonant leadership styles of commanding and pacesetting can be necessary and effective at times when it is appropriate to shake things up and get things moving in a new direction. Ultimately it is the leader's job to infuse energy into their surroundings. One must be very careful with the tendency to default to these styles, however. Overuse can cause burn out, suppress initiative and encourage staff turnover.

More resonant leadership styles that encourage cooperation, bonding and self starting are generally more effective long term operational models. The leader can create more sustainable levels of energy through vision, affiliation, democracy and coaching. These styles are discussed at length in Dan Goleman's book, "Primal Leadership."

## **AFFILIATION ?**

I believe that the most important of these styles for leadership of our teams and patients is affiliation. Dr. Paul Homoly defines leadership as "the ability to create an environment where people can succeed and feel better about themselves in your presence." He goes on to talk about "likeability." When we are likeable, people want to follow us and be influenced by us. Several skills are notable when discussing likeability. Connection with those who we wish to lead is critical. We connect with people when we give them our complete attention. Direct and unwavering eye contact is a connection skill. Looking people in the eye and paying attention to what they are saying with good listening skills honors that person. Using empathy to sense what they are feeling and expressing beyond the spoken word is very powerful in fully connecting. Expressing genuine interest in what is being communicated in a non-judgmental or critical way is a very likeable trait.

Another trait that makes us likeable or unlikable is our attitude about what is going on, and how we express it. We convey our attitude about things with both verbal and non-verbal cues. The emotions that we are experiencing are conveyed through what is known as an open loop system. People can literally feel what you are feeling and may be more aware of it than you are. Just as a herd of antelope will sense the presence of danger without a verbal warning, people will be aware of fear or frustration or aggression without them being spoken. Therefore, being aware of our attitude and modifying or centering ourselves as needed is an important skill for being likeable. One of the key ways we express our attitude is through our tone of voice. When we grew up, a parent may have said, "I don't like that tone of voice!" What they were actually saying was, "I don't like the way you feel about what was just said." Another time someone may remark, "Don't give me that look", or "I don't like your stance on that." Facial expression and body language betray our true emotions. A very likeable trait is the ability to accept others as they are. We can be accepting of people and respect their status and or opinions without agreeing

with them. A leader can only influence true significant and sustainable performance when they are liked and trusted. They do not necessarily need to be agreed with.

The third important skill in being likeable is also basic to trust building. Self-disclosure and/or self-story are powerful methods to move from having rapport with someone to sharing mutual trust. We tend to like people we trust. To be more accurate we tend to dislike those whom we distrust. We can actually trust someone we don't like, but it is highly unlikely that we will like someone we don't trust. When we trust someone, we generally know something about them. We often have something in common. Self-disclosure is how we develop that sense in other people. By expressing a mutual belief, background or experience we build common bonds. By opening up to others, we express our values and ethics. At the point that these values are perceived as equaling reliability and integrity, trust is established. Since trust is foundational to leadership effectiveness, and since we generally like effective leaders, self-disclosure is required to become a true leader. Therefore, affiliation, or the ability to lead through being likeable and creating a friendly and resonant atmosphere of cooperation is the most desirable leadership style.

Vision, democracy and coaching can still be effective in leading people or groups toward an energetic and common goal. However, that leader will be most successful if he or she is liked by a majority of the followers.

## **RELATIONSHIP?**

While we are discussing trust, it should be recognized that trustworthiness is one of the key building blocks to developing true relationship between people. Many times rapport is mistaken for relationship. In reality, rapport is only the first step or requirement to building a solid reliable relationship. We have already discussed self-disclosure leading to a sense of trust. Through trusting one another individuals can establish mutually understood expectations of performance and/or behavior. In an environment of trusting and knowing what is expected of one another, relationships can flourish and be mutually supportive. Interestingly enough, it is not a requisite of being in good relationship with someone to like them. Can you think of an instance where you may have had a basic rapport or cordiality with someone who you understood, trusted and knew what they expected of you but you didn't particularly like? That is what is often called a "working" or sometimes a "cool" relationship. How much more fulfilling and potentially productive and rewarding is it when partners in a relationship actually like each other?

Another trait that good leaders possess that makes them likeable is the ability to make people feel good about their work. Affirmation, especially in front of others, is one of the most important ingredients of a resonant style of leadership. Dale Carnegie uses the phrase, "Be hearty in your approbation and lavish in your praise" to be an effective leader. Tell people how much you appreciate their work and praise any and all improvement. Never criticize in front of others and always find something good to say to people even if you have to correct or reprimand them. We

can like someone, even if they have to redirect us, if they are coming from a good heart and see the good about what we are doing and who we are.

## **HOPE?**

Napoleon said, “A leader is a purveyor of hope”. People are drawn to those who give them hope or a sense of positive direction. A term used for perceiving and expressing the good in people and situations is “positive framing.” As dentists we are trained to examine, evaluate and diagnosis disease and the effects of disease. We often get so involved in explaining to people what’s wrong with their mouths that we rarely think to tell them what’s right. If we expect to be resonant with our patients, doesn’t it make sense that we are going to be more likeable leaders and, therefore, more influential if we tell them the good things first? Napoleon said, “A leader is a provider of hope.” Giving people hope is a powerful way to influence their behavior. Positive framing, giving people the good news first, helps build hope. Try to find a least two good things to say to a person for everything you are going to say that is negative. This holds true for all evaluative communication whether it is with patients, team members, family or business relationships.

Think what we often do with patients. After a casual greeting we assume a superior-inferior physical position over the person. Then we pull, tug, poke, probe, stretch and manipulate while we read off evil sounding utterances to our alien clad assistant. Next, we sit the patient up, breathe deeply and say something like, “Joan, you have decay, gum disease, worn teeth, bad breath and, by the way, your teeth are yellow and dingy. I can fill, scale, adjust, sweeten and whiten you. All that will only cost you \$3,000.00 and you can expect that your insurance won’t help with much of it. See Susie at the desk on your way out for an appointment. It was very pleasant to meet you.” Then we wonder why we don’t seem to have much influence on the patient’s behavior. Was there anything about the described process that was likeable or relationship building? Hopefully, this was over dramatization for most of us. It does, however, give us pause to reflect on the potential impact of the skills of leadership on our influence and effectiveness with patient response. The more we are able and willing to be likeable and establish relationship with our patients and, indeed, all of those with whom we wish to influence, the more effective we are going to be in leading them to action. Providing hope is perhaps the greatest tool of influence. The next level of success in dental practice will grow out of the influence generated by consistent vision and affiliative resonant leadership. The “leadership” model, complementing and enhancing the “excellence” model equals a practice that is moving up toward the next level of productivity, profit and value.