

Building a Five-Star Practice

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Reprinted from California Dental Association Journal, April 1995

If you can dream of a productive, fun day of helping people achieve comfort, health, function and natural beauty, you have a potentially bright future. However, if these people are appreciative patients, who have taken on the responsibility of their own health, your future is even more secure. And perhaps just as important, if your dental team has this very same dream, then join the few who will flourish in the face of “managed care” influences in all of the health service professions.

My very strong belief, after 25 years of practice, is that our own personal vision has more to do with our future than any third party control. However, this “vision” cannot be something written down and put into a drawer. It has to be such a core belief that it influences and directs each event in your life and practice. Furthermore, this vision has to be so clear and consistent that everyone around you knows what it is and exactly how you would react if the vision is challenged.

Whenever an empowered staff can answer a question or solve a problem based on their commitment to your clear vision, this gives you, the leader, time to achieve more...perhaps to effect more treatment, or maybe more time just listening to a patient. This is not just delegating. This process is what Peter Drucker calls creating associates out of each team member.¹

When your staff can answer for you based on their deep belief that they know what you stand for, then they consider themselves your associate. They are not only taking on the responsibility of their task, they take on your vision.

Far too many dentists have the idea that if they do good dentistry, they will be successful. I believe that it is essential to grasp and clearly understand the basis of the book *The E-Myth*. You not only are the technician (doer), you are also the manager (planner). But you must have a third role, that of the entrepreneur (visionary).²

It is vital to develop all these roles or parts of the practice. Therefore, our vision must include technical excellence, an empowered staff and atmosphere, and strong leadership exemplified each day by living the vision.

The concept of professionalism is important. If you accept the premise that you are trained to use your care, skill and judgment to the benefit of your patients prior to any self-profit, then you soon realize that the underlying basis of the vision must be your honesty and integrity. It does not imply that you serve your patients without profit; just that the patient always comes first.

Actually, in the book *Raving Fans*, Blanchard bridges the gap between business and profession by clearly putting the customer, or patient, first. Example after example is given to illustrate that the really unique successful enterprises are not satisfied with meeting customers' expectations – they exceed their customers' expectations.³

I am convinced that it has to be a part of the vision. It becomes very clear, however, that you cannot exceed everyone's expectations in your dental practice. Therefore, a plan must be attached to this goal of exceeding expectations. Interestingly, the plan happens to be quite congruent with the philosophy espoused at The Pankey Institute.⁴

The Pankey Philosophy starts with discovering who you are and what you want. And it is followed by discovering who your patients are and what they want. If that sounds too simple, you're right. Remember, it all has to be accomplished in the context of your philosophy (a set of principles and beliefs that guide you toward your vision).

This discovery process takes time and effort, and at first seems unproductive. However, your greatest asset to future happiness and success in dentistry is the time you spend listening to your patients. This pre-clinical and co-discovery examination time is the activity that really differentiates your practice. It is your premier opportunity to personalize your relationship with each patient, forming the basis of a trusting doctor-patient relationship. And it permits you to recognize which patients are ready for complete dentistry and which need to start with Phase I care.

As your vision is clarified, you may begin to picture the type of person attracted to it...the patient who wants you to be thorough and honest, and to exceed their expectations. As Peters suggests, that patient will want

you to be famous, to be special and unique.⁵ This leads to what I have begun to call a five-star practice. It is not for everyone. It is not easy to achieve or to maintain. For example, how many restaurants labeled “five-star” have left you disappointed? Both the service and the product must be exemplary, or we are not only disappointed, but also confused by their reputation.

In dentistry, this means a master dentist, surrounded by an empowered staff that believes in the vision and employing a master dental technician. Team members’ mouths have benefited from this dentist’s care: they can only speak with conviction about complete dentistry if they have experienced at least a thorough co-discovery examination. The administrative assistant understands the vision and provides a schedule that permits excellent dentistry as well as time for relationships to continue to bond and grow.

Notice that I have not defined the vision for you. That’s up to each of you. It is a very personal thing. When you live it and you begin to achieve it, you will know it; it will create the sense of *deja-vu*. In other words, leaders who define and live their vision have already experienced it in their mind. Once they actually begin practicing the way the vision predicted, the experiences and results seem very familiar.

Dr. Pankey helped dentistry understand how to make this work with a rather simple yet significant observation: patients refer other patients with similar values.⁴ Thus, if we satisfy a patient who only wants emergency care, without leading them into a comprehensive examination, then the probability is higher that their referral will balk at complete dentistry...or be disturbed at your inference of complete dentistry...or even feel you are over treating or too expensive.

However, a patient who has trusted in you and has an attitude that places health and dental concerns at a premium, and has completed treatment in your practice, usually makes a special kind of referral. This new patient is likely to expect a complete examination and a relationship-based practice. And this new patient will expect to hear from you about a lifetime plan for optimum dental health, provided at an appropriate pace for his/her own situation.

The subtle key here is to ask for referrals at the correct time and from the correct patient. If it is not just more numbers you want, but more quality-oriented, higher dental I.Q. patients, then ask for a referral at the completion of dental treatment. And only ask the same kind of patient you want more of, and thus are replicating in your practice.

Conclusion

Whatever your philosophy of practice or your vision, causing it to permeate every level of your practice and its relationships will hasten its realization. The five-star practice described above is one example of how a philosophical principle can direct the future growth of your practice.

References

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