
Mastery 

Mastering the
Business of Practice

THE MASTERY COMPANY
Woodinville, Washington

THE MASTERY SERIES

MASTERING THE
BUSINESS OF
PRACTICE

By

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THE MASTERY PROMISE

“Mastering your enemies makes you strong.
Mastering yourself makes you fearless.”
~ Lao Tzu

In consulting a new client, my first step is to have him or her establish a clear definition of what it means to be successful. How would success look? How would success feel? How would you measure success? Who would you be that you're not now being if you were successful?

My personal definition of success in writing this book begins and ends with its impact on you. I'll consider it a triumph if it opens your eyes, engages your awareness and expands your understanding of yourself as an owner, manager, leader, marketer and service provider.

This was never intended to be a How-To book. This is a Who-To book. This volume is a mirror, in a way. Hold it up, look directly into your own eyes and fearlessly examine yourself and how you are running your practice as a business.

This book is presented in question and answer format. The questions come from clients and other dentists around the country. I selected each question in this book because I've run into it numerous times in more than two decades as a practice management consultant. They are questions I know you ask yourself – nearly every day.

My promise is a book that is eye-opening and energetic – and one that will be ragged at the edges in five years. A book that impacts the way you run your practice as a business. A book that is true to the Mastery spirit and to those seeking to master the business of their practice. You have now taken the first step in your commitment to success.

Be fearless.

Marc B. Cooper, DDS, MSD

INTRODUCTION

What does it really take to have a highly successful practice?

You might think that having a thriving practice takes knowing the right way to run your practice as a business. And to run your practice as a highly profitable business, you might believe you must have precise scripts, the best business processes, and the most well-defined and highly calibrated systems. Sorry to disappoint you, none of these delivers success.

Practice success goes far beyond knowing *how* to produce the results. Practice success isn't the result of the right information, prescriptions, recipes, tips, and formulas. There is another domain to master without which success will not occur. And that is what this book is about.

This domain is about *who* you need to be as an owner, as a manager, as a leader and as a marketer. If you can't be a powerful owner, if you can't be an effective manager, if you can't be an inspirational leader, if you can't be someone who attracts patients, then whatever information you have and whatever actions you take will not be effective.

In order to access this domain of who you need to be in the practice, I have written this book using the most commonly asked questions culled from my 25 years as a practice management consultant.

By standing in the shoes of dentists who have asked these questions and by thoughtfully considering the responses, you will see yourself and how you are in your practice. You will see how the answers in this book teach profound lessons about yourself, which will allow you to change, resulting in you being more highly effective and powerful in your practice.

Lao Tzu once said; "Mastering your enemies makes you strong. Mastering yourself makes you fearless."

This book is about mastering yourself in the business of practice. This book will give you insights, revelations and a much deeper understanding of yourself as a leader, manager and owner. These insights will help you to think and act in new ways that allow you to produce much better outcomes and results.

This is your path to mastery. Let's take these first steps together.

Dr. Marc B. Cooper
The Mastery Company

FOREWORD

If you are reading this book, I hope you already know Dr. Marc Cooper. If you don't already know him and you are a dental practice owner, you will feel as if he knows you personally when you read this book. Really. Marc is as he claims to be: He knows the hearts and minds of dentists. Our thoughts and feelings apparently are quite universal, and, given that we generally all practice individually, we haven't yet appreciated how similar we are and how supportive we can be of one another. Marc is here to help, to make us successful business leaders, to increase our implicit and practical knowledge of management and to support us in creating futures.

As a dentist and dental practice owner of more than 20 years, I could have easily submitted all the questions that appear in this book, although I think I only really sent in one. And yet all these compressed, bite-size messages are concepts that I put into action almost immediately upon reading them, even if I didn't think that the particular issue was my most pressing concern. These messages un-bundle the management chaos that I often experience and divide heart-wrenching issues into do-able conversations and tasks. Voila! I am more genuine, content, creative and successful. Not that this doesn't take courage. But Marc encourages taking action even when our palms are sweating and our tummies are churning and our chests are tight. Yet physiologic responses are not the only indicators of change. I should let you know that when I follow Marc's advice, my practice numbers greatly exceed my targets and my staff reports increased contentment and success.

Marc Cooper is a pundit and a teacher. He makes you feel as if his knowledge becomes your own – a conjoined intelligence that elicits power and creativity. He helps you create a future without preconceived limits and he helps you to realize that living in the present does not need to be miserable – that you can "choose what you have chosen." Marc supports you in incubating and executing action plans that make your practice and patient care better. When you work with Marc, he demands that you never make promises lightly. He is a master at supporting you in relearning how your intuition is viable and valuable. And Marc lets you be astonished at yourself.

The information herein is more than just management vitamins, though. The messages cannot be read without creating change. Whether you are in a velvet rut or struggling to get by, these missives will help you create a future much better and different than the one you perceived yesterday. Your

tomorrow will be quite different because of the message you took to heart and acted upon today. The brick wall in the way of solving that tricky staff issue now has a sparkling clear window to a potential solution. While in the past you may have felt dissatisfied but unable to describe what you wanted, you will now see that you can create a future of purpose and meaning.

Truly, what more could you ask for?

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Family Practice
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Roosevelt is quoted as saying,

“You alone must do it, but you can't do it alone.”

For me, this is the essence of my work and this book. This book is the result of working with remarkable clients over the last 25 years. Professionals who hold me to account as their coach, their mentor, and their partner in success. In this kind of committed relationship, I am called upon to operate at my highest level and to continuously stretch myself to deliver consulting and coaching that strongly impacts and changes people. In essence, my clients wrote this book since my work has totally developed in service to them. I deeply acknowledge these clients who have allowed me to live my vision, serve my mission and stay on purpose. Without my relationship with my clients, this book would not have been possible.

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DEDICATION

To my teachers, mentors and coaches; Charlie Smith, B. Braden, Werner Erhard, Alan Cahn, Herta Spencer, Mert Landay, Ron Bynum, Richard Condon, Harley Sullivan, Saul Schluger, Bill Ammons, Bob Hunter, and John Lohse. All of these individuals have enabled me to hold myself to my highest thought. They are professionals who believed in me, my work and who I am. And people in whose eyes I saw myself as who I wanted to be.

To Chris Creamer for his unconditional commitment, driving intention and gift of technology. Without Chris this book would never have been published.

DISCLAIMER

Results are a function of integrity and structure.

The information in this book can inform, coach and teach, but it cannot do it for you.

The information in this book cannot force you to operate with integrity.

The information in this book cannot give you the courage to confront problems with your partner or associate.

The information in this book cannot make you build and manage your structures.

It is up to you. You are responsible.

By responsibility, I mean that you see yourself as "cause in the matter."

Blame, shame, guilt and fault are the antithesis of responsibility.

No problem can be solved, no issue effectively handled, no concern effectively addressed, unless you hold that you are responsible.

Integrity is honoring your word as yourself.

Integrity is making and keeping promises.

Integrity is holding yourself, each staff member and the practice accountable for its word.

So as you read this book and gain new knowledge and insights into your practice and yourself, remember: It is up to you to implement what you learn.

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CONTEXT OF MANAGEMENT

Management has two jobs: getting work done through people and developing people through work.

Management gets work done through others by focusing on outcomes and results.

Results are a function of integrity and structure. Management's job is, therefore, to encourage people to give and keep their word – integrity – and ensure that they do so. Then, management builds structures to make that happen. Those structures include systems, goals, targets, metrics, feedback mechanisms, manuals, job descriptions, performance reviews, training and coaching.

Management communicates in three basic languages. One is commitment. In it, people give their word about what they'll do and by when they'll do it. Management's job is to empower them to keep their promises.

The second language of management is coaching. It is a way of communicating that enhances the effectiveness of the actions people take in doing their jobs.

And the third language management speaks is acknowledgement. That way people are known, honored and appreciated.

Management's job is also to develop people through work. Management does that by increasing the scope and depth of people's promises so a gap is created, requiring them to expand their skills and abilities in order to close it.

Management's duty is to continuously format the complexity of delivering the final service or product into do-able units that can be achieved by employees so the patient/customer is fully served.

Ultimately, management gets paid for results.

TACKLING STAFF BEHAVIOR

One thing I do that I know I shouldn't do is fail to address issues with my staff immediately. I wait until something gets so bad that I am forced to act. Even though I know I should talk to the staff member as soon as I recognize the problem, I don't.

Why do I keep on doing this?

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First, I appreciate your question. It is an affliction of most dentists, nearly all of whom are conflict-averse. Let's take Dr. John, for example. He fears that if he confronts an issue, it will cause a conflict. So, being conflict-averse, he avoids addressing the issue altogether.

Rather than handling a staff issue when it occurs, Dr. John hopes it will simply go away. "Hope" is the operative word here. In management, hope never works.

There are several ways for you to improve your performance in this area. First, get very clear on the benefits and the costs of your current behavior.

Are you really aware of the depth and magnitude of the costs? It costs you your own well-being. It costs you the respect of the other staff members. It costs you better staff performance and, therefore, time and money. It costs you your self-worth, your power, and your future. When you really get in touch with the costs you will see that they are usually very high.

What you may not be aware of are the benefits of continuing your current behavior. You may not see the payoff in avoiding the issues. You actually get a lot out of not addressing the issues with staff.

So what are the benefits? You get to play it safe. You don't have to take a risk and put the issue on the table. Another benefit is you can make your staff members wrong and have yourself be right. "She's [fill in the blank]." "He just doesn't [fill in the blank]." Worse, you may go around to other staff members and get agreement about why you are right, which is just another form of gossip. A third benefit is you don't have to be responsible. Why? Because it's his or her fault. And remember, the antithesis of responsibility is blame, guilt and fault. So it's a good way to get yourself off the hook. And lastly, you don't have to fulfill your commitments as a leader, owner or manager.

Because you are unaware of the benefits, you'll wait until the costs are so crushing that you have to do something about it. But, by that time the situation is usually so bad and toxic it requires a huge amount of energy and time – or you are left with only one action: "You're fired."

These benefits are inherently more important to you than practice success and staff performance. They are more important to you than your core values and your commitments. These benefits are more important to you than making your targets or goals. You'd rather be right than happy. Your behavior can only change when you realize the costs are greater than the benefits and that the benefits actually sabotage your success.

So Step 1 is realizing that the reason you are afraid to confront your staff is you are scared to make yourself responsible and take a risk. You don't want to give up being right. It's much easier to avoid being direct and straightforward. And you make it okay to not be a powerful owner, leader and manager because you think that your real job is being a dentist.

Step 2 is doing it.

HOW DO I MAKE MY STAFF CARE?

I want my staff to be more effective, more accountable, more responsible. Seems I am the only one, with the exception of my business manager, who really cares. How do I get my staff to be more responsible?

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Here's the bad news: You can't "make" anyone responsible. You can't lay responsibility on someone. Responsibility is taken, never given.

What I mean by responsibility is holding yourself accountable. You must see yourself as the agent that produced the circumstance, issue or problem. Blame, shame, guilt and fault are the opposite of responsibility. When you blame someone, you are not making him or her responsible.

Responsibility begins with choice, so that is where I would begin with your staff: putting them at choice. To do that, you need to make a direct, clear request and let them know they have the choice of saying "Yes" or "No." Either response has a consequence.

For example, say a staff member is becoming consumed with a personal matter. She is now constantly on the phone trying to work it out. Worse, this is a long-term problem with a family member. There are many times you walk out to the front desk and rather than seeing her with patients or on the phone with patients, you see her on the phone with people involved in her family matter. She is an experienced employee who usually gets the job done.

What do you do?

You sit her down and put her at choice. The practice needs attention and intention. The patients, schedule and other issues need attention and intention. The staff member has neither. If you hope it is going to get better, you'll be disappointed. Hope does not work as a management technique.

The conversation is straightforward. Here are the basics:

"This is what the practice needs to operate. I am not getting that from you. I understand you have concerns and issues. I appreciate your problems. I am not sure what you need to do to make your situation better. But the practice has needs and requirements. So I need for you to make a choice about how

you want to be in the practice. It's up to you. Choose. I am willing to support you in whatever choice you make."

"Yes" takes it in one direction. "No" takes it in another. So rather than dictating correction, rather than making demands or, if you are like most dentists, delivering covert communications, make clear requests and give people the opportunity to make choices. You know what you need. They can say "Yes" to it or "No" to it. It's up to them, not you.

HIGH TEST GAS BUT NO ACCELERATION

I have been in general practice for 16 years. I have spent a lot of money developing my practice systems, structures and software. I have also used consultants and trainers to assist me in developing and implementing those systems and structures. I try to stay on the forefront. Last year I changed my software, which has been a terrible nightmare, but I thought it would really improve the practice's performance in numbers of areas.

I have always believed that with those investments – upgrading my business systems and structures – my practice would grow at a significant rate. It hasn't. Yet, I don't know what else to do to increase the performance of the practice.

What's my problem?

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I know you'd like to believe what you read in the dental rags about a practice's success depending on strategy, structure and systems. I know it's easy to sit in an audience as the dental gurus talk about business structures and systems and be swayed into buying their brand of snake oil. It's not that systems and structures aren't important. They are. But as with a car, the performance is a lot more dependent on the driver than the vehicle itself.

You hear this all the time: "Get the right business plan. Have a functional budget. Generate up-to-date employee manuals. Do routine staff performance reviews. Set clear targets and goals. Get the latest and greatest software." And on and on. Those recommendations are being pitched as "The Answer." But they are only a part of the answer and, clearly, are not the answer itself.

News Flash! Having the best structures and systems does little if anything to enhance practice performance. Sorry. It's a myth. Looks like you bought into the myth. Peak performance has much more to do with communication than snake oil. But dentists keep on throwing money at better systems and expensive advice on developing and managing better systems, software and structures. Sometime I wonder why dentists just don't just burn their money. It's quicker.

Here's my advice: *Learn how to communicate effectively.* Learn how to initiate crucial and difficult conversations. Learn how to communicate at the

right time, in the right place, with the right person. And watch your productivity soar!

Check this out. Look at what happens when you or your employees fail to deliver on your promises. In the most successful practices I work with, when people don't deliver on their promises, someone steps in to discuss the problem. In underperforming or failing practices, no one says a word. The conversation is avoided. How does it work in your practice?

In good practices, dentists deal directly and immediately with problems. In the best practices, everyone holds everyone accountable, regardless of his or her level or position. The path to high performance doesn't pass through a static system, but through face-to-face effective communication at all levels.

The most productive and profitable practices I have worked with have developed the skills to effectively deal with difficult or crucial conversations rather than avoid or bypass them.

Ask yourself this: If an employee is underperforming, fails to live up to a promise, doesn't carry his or her fair share of the weight or isn't productive enough, are you able as a practice to address the issue right away? If not, therein lies your productivity problem.

Here is my recommendation. Read one or all three of the following books:

- *Fierce Conversations* (Scott)
- *Difficult Conversations* (Stone, Patton, Heen)
- *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson)

Work on communication and you will produce and maintain positive relationships in your office and dramatically decrease your turnover rate. Get trained in effective communication. Get someone in your office who knows how to improve your communication.

Bottom Line: Communicating Better = Making More Money!

I NEED A STAFF WAKEUP CALL

I have great difficulty in being direct with my staff. There are things I want to say that I don't say. I see people do things that upset me and I don't address them. I step around them or avoid them all together.

What should I do?

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Dentists, more than any other professionals, have trouble communicating. In fact, it is exactly that difficulty that is often a major contributing factor in pushing them into dentistry, because it is a structural interaction, not a communicative interaction. In other words, it is easier to work on teeth than talk to people.

It's only natural that you should gravitate to where there is the least discomfort. In dentistry, the discomfort in communication is much deeper and broader with staff people than with patients or colleagues. Therefore, you must first realize that you will be doing something that makes you uncomfortable and you must realize that it will require you to take a risk to do it.

So the first question is: "Are you willing to take the risk?" If the answer is, "No," send a memo, hope or complain. Those won't work, of course, but they'll make you feel better. If the answer is, "Yes, I am willing to take a risk," then continue reading.

Now, stop rehearsing what you are going to say in your head. It never comes out that way. You are not going to do it "right." In fact, there is no "right" way to do it. There is only "doing it."

Here is a special technique for doing that. The technique has three steps. You must follow all three in the recommended order. No skipping to the end!

STEP 1: *Confess or disclose your feelings or your fears.*

To get the communication started, you need to get yourself on the field of honest communication. So you first must reveal how what you are about to say makes you feel.

Example: "I am really uncomfortable talking to you about this particular issue and I have been avoiding talking about it for three months." By honestly reporting how the communication makes you feel, you will create a relationship and a condition where you can say what you have to say. Remember, do not skip any step.

STEP 2: *Tell the staff member what you are afraid he or she will think, say or do if you say it.*

One major reason you don't say what you want to say is you are afraid of the conflict or upset it will cause. You hope it will either go away or get better by itself. You think you know how the staff member will respond and things are good enough, so why push it? Why? Because the status quo costs you your power, integrity, satisfaction, and your relationships with other staff members, as well as your future. The cost is huge.

Example: "I've been worried to talk to you about something because I think you will react by getting upset. That's not my intention, but I'm worried you'll take it as 'I don't like you' or 'There is something wrong with you' and that's not how I mean it."

STEP 3: *Say it is as though you might be wrong.*

If you say it like you're right, you paint the staff member into a corner. By saying it as though you might be wrong, you give the employee safety and choice – two ingredients necessary for effective communication.

Example: "I could be wrong about this, I could be off, but it looks to me as though you are making a lot of personal calls during business hours."

What goes unsaid in a relationship becomes what the relationship is about. What you complain about is what goes unsaid. Have your own slogan for the next few months. Take a risk. Use my technique outlined above. And "Just Say It."

IGNORED CONCERNS BECOME BIG ISSUES

It seems like I am always dealing with staff issues. Although I've changed staff members lots of times over my 17 years of practice, tried lots of techniques, read books, even hired two consultants over the last four years to address staff issues, no matter what I try, staff issues always seem to return.

What should I do?

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You have continuous staff issues because you avoid doing something about the concerns that evolve into issues.

Listen closely: A concern always turns into an issue when you fail to address it.

The fact is you, like most dentists, avoid addressing staff concerns. You, like other dentists, hope that staff concerns will go away. You hope they'll resolve themselves. But hope is not action. Hope is wishing. As General Patton once said; "Hope is a terrible battle plan." Hope doesn't produce results, action does.

Let me say it another way: A concern left unaddressed always turns into an issue. Issues are much harder to handle than concerns. Issues take much more time and energy to resolve than concerns. So I repeat: Concerns do not disappear by themselves.

What's the difference between a concern and an issue? There is a notable difference in weight, mass, scope, depth and emotion. Concerns and issues have the same core elements: a commitment thwarted, a goal blocked, a value disregarded – or a combination of all three. But invariably, when a concern is left unaddressed, the core elements become much more emotionally charged and greater in volume and weight. When a concern reaches a particular size and weight, it turns into an issue. A molehill becomes a mountain.

Given the heavy cost of leaving concerns unattended, why do dentists continue that behavior? Because they are conflict-averse. They don't want to deal with any concern that might inflame a conflict. So they step over the garbage. And you know what happens to garbage if you don't take it out.

So, get some courage and step into the concerns. Put them on the table. Address them directly. In our Staff Management Program we teach one way to address concerns, but there are hundreds of techniques out there. What's important to remember is if you don't address concerns, they will not go away. They will continue to grow and will soon turn into issues. I can't say strongly enough. Handle concerns ASAP!

Rule of Thumb: "Don't step over the trash. Ever!"

FAIL-SAFE EMPLOYEES

I am a 38-year-old female general dentist. Although I have a staff of just five individuals, I have had high staff turnover ever since I started the practice nine years ago. I'd like to know what I can do to retain staff. Where am I making my mistakes?

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Let's begin with new employees. There isn't anything more risky than bringing a new employee into your practice. After all, the right person can bring new energy and enthusiasm and relieve you of less productive duties, allowing you to concentrate on your grand vision. But the wrong one can irritate other staff members, patients and referrals – in short, do real damage.

What I have found to be the difference between success and failure is what happens during the new employee's first three months on the job. A new book by Harvard Business School Professor Michael Watkins, *The First 90 Days*, fully validates that assertion.

Why are the first three months so crucial? Fellow employees and patients make judgments based on remarkably little data. Those early judgments tend to stick with people. Building credibility in the first three months can propel a new hire through a lot.

But most dentists make very common mistakes with new hires during these first three months. The most common mistake is they don't pay enough attention to the assimilation process. You can't just hire a person and say, "Okay, go!" The person needs to work directly with you to learn the practice – the culture, the politics, "the way it is around here."

Take a look. Is your impulse not to spend time with the new hire, but to leave it up to the rest of your staff or to the departing individual that he or she is to replace? I want you to know this is deadly. It's especially deadly because you, like nearly all dentists, have very strong views about what works and what doesn't. If you don't set out your expectations and values early, you are likely to be very disappointed down the road.

I strongly recommend that during the first three months you be really vigilant about trying to spot when new employees are getting into trouble. Usually you can tell by looking in their eyes for that haunted look. And obviously, if

they're upsetting the chemistry in your practice there's a problem. You should also look to see if they are moving out of their comfort zone. Or are they immersed in their own functional work only as a means of avoiding the larger issues of working with others and being part of the team? That's the biggest warning sign.

If you see that a new employee is getting into trouble, take action!

Get him or her into your office and see where he or she is struggling. Is it style? Is it resources? Ask how things are going without putting the employee on the defensive. But if he or she is failing and unwilling to talk about it, it's now a matter of managing their exit.

When people start off badly, it is difficult to reverse their direction. If new people make major mistakes and alienate others, they're cooked. If they are merely mediocre, they've still got a shot, but you must nip their counterproductive dynamics in the bud. What usually happens is the new employee does something stupid or wrong and the people around him or her draw back from sharing critical information, which sets the new hire up to make another bad mistake.

A bad hire in a very large practice can be an inconvenience. But for a small practice like yours, it can be a near-death experience. The leverage of an individual in a small practice is huge, which is why small practice owners have to move beyond the sink-or-swim mentality and start directly managing and leading people from the very beginning.

HOW TO PICK WINNERS AND GET RID OF THE LOSERS – BEFORE YOU LOSE

Over the last two decades of my practice life I have had many employees. Some I had to fire. Some left because of a change in their situation like babies, husbands relocating, going back to school, changing fields, found another office that would pay more per hour, etc. Only one has stayed for more than eight years. Seems I haven't gotten any better at recognizing and keeping good employees.

How do I recognize a good employee?

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I believe if you “listen” closely to the conversations employees have with you and with each other, you can tell pretty quickly if you have a keeper. In my world-view, “you create yourself in your speaking.” The philosopher Heidegger said; “Human beings belong to language.” So conversations an employee has with you and other staff is a very clear and accurate diagnostic to what kind of employee she will be.

If you hear “certain” conversations from an employee, she is someone who will contribute rather than distract from the practice. If an employee is engaged in certain conversations, her actions will also be effective and she'll be more of a team player and much more of a commitment in action.

So the coaching is listen for the following good and bad conversations.

Good employees have conversations which include:

1. Asking “What needs to be done?”
2. Asking “What is right for the practice?”
3. Actively listening to you and others.
4. Developing action plans and presenting solutions.
5. Taking responsibility for their actions.
6. Taking responsibility for communicating.
7. Making requests rather than complaining or opining.
8. Focusing on opportunities rather than problems.
9. Thinking and saying “we” rather than “I.”

10. Acknowledging and appreciating people around her so as to have the people around her perform better.

Bad employees have conversations such as the following. They:

1. Rarely ask "What needs to be done," but always need to be told what to do.
2. Don't ask "What's good for the practice." They are indifferent to the success of the business.
3. Don't listen to others because they have their own agenda. They usually are a source of gossip. They always push to be right.
4. Don't develop action plans, but blame the problem on someone or something else.
5. Aren't responsible for their actions, but fault, shame or blame others.
6. Don't take responsibility for their communications, but blame others when communication is not working.
7. Complain, opine, gossip rather than make requests.
8. Focus on problems and breakdowns and can't see opportunities.
9. Always come from "I, me and my."
10. Demean, criticize, put-down coworkers so it damages the performance of people around them.

It is common practice to place a new employee on probation for 90 days. She may not master her job duties in 90 days, but during those 90 days she'll have lots of conversations with you and the other employees. If she is engaged in the conversations of "great" employees, she has the potential to be a great employee. If she engages in conversations of a "bad" employee, restart the interview process.

THE FAMOUS 90-DAY PROBATION PERIOD

Over my 13 years of owning a dental practice, I have always told new employees they are on a 90-day probation period. Given my track record of high staff turnover, I'm wondering what I might do differently during these first 90 days that might dramatically reduce staff turnover?

What I do now is assign someone to be their sponsor, who assists them in their training and goes over the employee handbook with them. Unless it's an assistant, I don't have that much to do with them unless there is a problem later on.

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There are two things to consider during those first 90 days of a staff individual's employment. One is what to "look for." Two is what "to do" during these first 90 days.

What I suggest you "look for" in the 90-day probation period is stated very clearly by Jerry Porras, author of *Built to Last* and *Success Built to Last*. He says over and over again; "Don't believe in words, only believe in behavior."

You can tell within the first 90 days if you are witnessing the "real deal" or not. Staff individuals that are high performers will have their walk match their talk. Whether you realize it or not, what you are doing in the first 90 days is judging whether her values and character match her words and actions. In essence you are measuring her integrity by carefully watching to see if her speaking matches her deeds. Do her words line up with her actions?

When the talk doesn't match the walk, then you have someone who is most likely inauthentic, hypocritical or pretending. This sets up a concern about trustworthiness, which by the way is a legitimate concern.

Something else you are looking at is whether her core values line up with your own core values. Core values are so basic, so fundamental, so critical, that if they do not match yours, if they are not in harmony with yours, if she says she embraces your core values but her actions and interactions don't reflect your values, it isn't going to work out – period.

Still another area that you are looking for and evaluating is whether or not she is a team player. If the staff doesn't embrace her in the first month, she will be isolated and ostracized. Some staff will subtly or overtly let you know about

their concerns. This is an extremely difficult situation to turn around. Seems once staff makes up their mind, it is hard to change.

That's what you're looking for. At the same time there is also what you do.

What you should be doing in the first 90 days is micro-managing. You should not be "leaving her alone," letting her be trained by the person who is leaving, and hoping for the best. Let me very technical here. When you leave it up to the person who is leaving to train her, then you leave it up to hope it will work out. The management term for this is called "dumb and dumber."

If you want a good employee, you need to invest your time and energy in those first 90 days. Yeah, yeah, I know how busy you are. I know you make your money at the chair. I know you have all those charts to do. I know you have a family. I know all the reasons why you don't have time. Well, how much time have you spent in finding and training new employees given your high turnover rate? How much worry, concern and suffering?

In our consulting and coaching, we strongly recommend that new employees meet with the dentist owner every day for at least two weeks. These don't have to be long meetings. "What's working? What's not working? How are you doing? How's it going with your daily goals?" These are the questions you would be asking.

During those first days, she should have daily goals, targets and objectives. Whatever her job, it should be broken into tiny pieces. An example would be if you hired a new individual to do collections; "Today I request you call eight people in the 30-day column with five direct contacts and four promises for payment." In my consulting lingo it would be you should be making very short term requests, with specific, tangible and measurable outcomes – every day.

If she fulfills these requests, then you expand your request from days to weeks and finally to months. By the end of the 90 days, she should have enough of the job mastered that you know the skills are there to get it done.

You see, by making and negotiating requests, she will get what you want, how you want it done and the results she is being asked to produce. And, you'll find out if she can deliver.

Lastly, and most important, you need to be able to pull the switch to let her go if after 90 days you are clear it isn't going to work out. Don't let yourself off the hook, "This is the best I can do. Dental employees are too hard to find. I'm too busy to find another one now." You do far more damage to the practice

and actually to this new employee by having her stay and keep on failing at her job because you are too chicken to pull the switch. People, who aren't winning at their job, suffer. Don't let people suffer.

HYGIENE HELL AND BACK AGAIN

I have been in general practice for 21 years. I have had two full-time hygienists for the last nine years. One hygienist has been with me for seven years, the other for five. My issue is keeping my hygiene schedule full. It's a constant battle.

The no-show and cancellation rate always seems too high. The salaries I have to pay the hygienists are simply outrageous and they frequently don't produce enough to cover their expenses. Worse, they often act like prima donnas in the office, refusing to do anything else but their hygiene work. They don't call patients to fill the schedule and forget about helping out at the front desk or cleaning up in the back.

For the money they get paid, I would think they'd care a lot more about the practice than they do. I feel helpless in making this situation better, especially with the shortage of hygienists in my area.

My questions are: How to do I get and keep my hygiene schedule full? And how do I get the hygienists to be team players?

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I hear this same complaint over and over. Let me begin by saying that you probably won't like my answers.

If you're like most dentists, what you want is the magic bullet so you can just get hygiene fixed, so you don't have to worry about hygiene anymore and so you don't have to take any direct action. Sorry, my recommendations won't fix hygiene and I don't have the magic bullet.

There are three steps I suggest you consider taking. None of them is easy. Each requires courage and commitment and each will put you at risk. It is your choice. And as you know, every choice has a consequence. Taking no action and continuing to complain about hygiene is one choice.

STEP 1: This is the hardest part. You need to take full responsibility for your hygiene program. Sorry. You need to stop blaming and faulting your hygienists, the profession, the hygiene schools, your receptionist and your recall patients. You are the owner and head manager of your practice and you are responsible for the performance of your employees, the quality of

care they deliver and the level of oral health generated in your practice. You are the bottom line. You are where the buck stops.

Have you forgotten that you are the owner and the one who hired these hygienists? Did it slip your mind that you are the top manager, the one who has the authority to demand and direct action for results? Did you overlook that you are the leader, the one who can generate inspiration, vision, "can do and will do?" It isn't up to them. It is up to you!

I understand how easy it is to cast blame, to fault others, to be the victim and to be resigned. But those are choices you make. They are not the "truth." Things are not written in stone. Why do you make your current choices? You make choices of perception, attitude and relationship so you don't have to be responsible.

So, stop with the "Oh poor me" and "They are doing it to me" and "There's nothing I can do about it." Take full responsibility for your hygiene program and your delivery of hygiene care.

If you can't do that, nothing will change. Can you do that? Better yet, will you do that?

I am willing to bet the farm that you don't hold hygiene as vital, fundamental or critical to the practice. Rather, you hold hygiene as something you need to do, some way to keep on generating restorative for you to do. It is something that patients expect and a way to keep patients around the practice. For you the real action is in your chair as you do your high-end restorative or cosmetic cases. If you could practice without a hygiene department, would you?

The question: Can you shift hygiene from a need to a want?

STEP 2: Generate a new context where hygiene is core to practice success, both clinically and financially. If hygiene for you is just a pain, that's the context of hygiene in your practice. And, as I have said repeatedly, context is decisive.

Let me give you an example of another context for hygiene. Let's say the context is an authentic commitment to continuously improving your patients' oral health. Your current context most likely is maintenance care, or if you're a little fancier, "reicare." But what does that context give you? It isn't about improvement. The maintenance context is about maintaining the status quo. It isn't about improving anything. It isn't about making people healthier. In the

context of maintenance, your hygiene program has no rousing mission. The current mission, given the maintenance context, is to bring patients back every six months, clean their teeth, push bleaching and get the crown done on 18. Wow, if I was a hygienist, I'd sure be inspired to come to work!

But let's say you declared: "Our hygiene program is committed to improving the oral health of every patient we see." What if you selected some oral health index so you could measure health improvement of your patients over time? What if you said (and really meant it) "The purpose of our hygiene program is to constantly and consistently improve the health of every patient we see!" What if "improving the health of every patient we see" was a true and burning mission of the hygiene portion of the practice? How would hygienists respond to that context? How would patients? Shift the context to one that makes a difference.

STEP 3: Measure and set goals. You need to measure your no-shows and your cancellation rate. You need to set targets. You, not they, need to become a team member of the hygiene team and play full-out to reduce your cancellation numbers. That means you need to talk to your patients about the critical importance of keeping their hygiene appointments. You need to talk about it at their initial exam, and every time you do a hygiene check. You need to be committed to each and every patient keeping the appointments they make. You need to be the team leader in hygiene, not the fuming boss. Those need to be your targets, not theirs.

I know it wasn't the answer you wanted to hear. I suggest you follow Step 1, responsibility, Step 2, context, and Step 3, true targets and see what it gives you. And by the way, if you complete Steps 1, 2 and 3, your hygienists will become team players.

Or you can follow the wisdom of another great philosopher, Yogi Berra, who said, "I never blame myself when I'm not hitting. I just blame the bat. And if it keeps up, I change bats."

STAFF PAY: POLICY OR PAIN!

I am trying to make my office run more like a business. One area where I really struggle is HR. My staff overhead is 34% which I think is too high for a pedo office. But I get bullied into raises at each review. It's not whether or not I will give a raise, it is always a matter of how much.

My staff work extremely hard and I want them paid well, but I don't like the way things are going for evaluations and raises. The staff that are pushier and "enjoy the battle" wind up getting paid more, and the meek and humble get less. So I decided to change the system this year, freeze raises to 2.5 percent cost of living and then at the beginning of each year dole out salary increases all at once and make sure it's closer to 32% of the operating budget.

The concept has not gone over very well with the pushier staff. I feel like the bad guy and am facing mutiny. I can't imagine other businesses operating with a guaranteed raise mentality.

Am I on the right track or is there a better way to get my goals without drawing such a hard line?

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The matter of staff raises nearly always generates discomfort for every dentist in private practice. Staff raises invariably bring tension, upset and anger. The salary transaction promotes resentment and bitterness. Staff salary arbitration becomes a yearly concern causing loss of power and affinity in a dentist's relationship to his or her staff.

It's quite simple. Look at the way you think and act around salary issues (Reread your statement and question.) If you look carefully, you will see the language you use to think about staff salaries has the subject of "I." "I feel, I can't, I decided." This naturally pushes you to "I" versus "them." Not a great place to work from on this issue. A much better approach would be to focus on "what is right for the practice," now and for the future. And if you looked from here, you'd see a whole different world.

From the point of view of "what's right for the practice," you'd notice your lack of a raise policy. Without policy, people govern. When people govern, they are vulnerable to manipulation and domination. When people govern,

psychology and personality have the seat of power. So without a raise policy, raises are solely up to you. And of course, the staff figures out ways to squeeze you. Who can blame them, it always works.

It would be far better to sit down with employees and say – “Here is our raise policy. If you want to work in this practice, this is how raises are determined.” Then it’s not up to you – it’s determined by the policy.

What is policy? A policy is a decision that guides, limits or controls many decisions. There are decisions you make, which effect only a specific action at one point in time. That is simply a decision, not policy. A policy is a decision that guides or controls many decisions over a period of time.

Policies need to be written (codified) in order to have power over many decisions over a period of time. The more decisions affected by a policy and the longer the period of time it can be effective, the bigger the policy. Good governance starts with big policies and works to smaller ones as needed.

Examples of *decisions*:

- We will buy this piece of equipment next month.
- We will give Jane a bonus this quarter.

Example of *policies*:

- We will purchase equipment under the following conditions:
 - We have generated the cash to pay for it outright.
 - We will not incur debt to buy equipment.
 - The equipment must be included in our annual equipment budget, or we have decided to substitute a budgeted with an unbudgeted item.
- We will pay staff bonuses once a year on January 31st to all staff on a percentage of compensation bases. The amount available for staff bonuses will not exceed 25% of the practices' before tax profit.

So the objective is to establish policy that governs – governs in such a way that it decides how the practice decides to give raises. We suggest that a raise policy minimally include an annual cost-of-living increase and this be specified in terms of an annual percent increase and what exactly this percentage is based on. Then, additional increases are based on staff performance in four particular quadrants (attitudes/values, behavior/skills,

relationships/norms, results/process). How staff is rated and measured in each of these four quadrants is clearly spelled out. How they are scored and how their scores impact their raises is also plainly defined.

As you can tell with these four quadrants, it would take time and consideration, some counsel and benchmarking, to determine how you would calculate performance in each quadrant. But wouldn't it be far more effective to establish a clear raise policy that decides how people get raises rather than you having to decide each and every time?

In my view, what is missing is you do not have a raise policy and without one you will continue to get what you already have – more of the same.

DON'T LOSE WITH LOYALTY

I'm a general dentist in a fairly affluent Colorado suburb. I've been in practice 13 years. I am one of four women dentists in my area. I have five full-time staff and a part-time sterilization assistant. My problem is I have continuously high staff turnover.

For example, over the last year, two of my key staff people, my senior assistant and hygienist, have taken positions with two of my major competitors. It just makes me so angry to have to keep on recruiting and training staff and then lose them.

I think I am a fair and reasonable boss. I think I pay well. I think I take good care of my patients. We have staff meetings. I send my staff to continuing educational programs. We have social events with their families. I have used practice management consultants to work on staff meetings and communication. What more can I do?

It seems I can't find employees that are truly loyal to me or the practice. The exception is I have one employee, my receptionist, who is completely loyal to me. She's been with me for over 10 years. She's never a problem, never argues with me, always supportive. I need four more of 'her.'

How do I get all my employees to be loyal to me and the practice?

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You are not alone. There is a tremendously high turnover rate in dental practices throughout this country. The turnover rate in dental practices is just slightly less than that of fast food restaurants.

Why is there such a high turnover rate in dental practices? There are numbers of reasons and factors. But one major driving force causing this high turnover rate is not the pay, not the lack of opportunity for advancement, not the duties and responsibilities of the job. No, it is the culture within the practice itself.

Most dentists place loyalty right up there with hard work and timeliness on their short list of cherished values. But it's this seeking loyalty from staff that ultimately drives them away.

Dentists want staff who are totally committed to them and their vision. Dentists want staff that will make decisions as if their own money were on the line. Dentists want staff that won't defect to their neighbor down the street. Every dentist wants staff that holds these values as sacred. But are these really the qualities of loyalty?

What dentists really want are "team players" who will implement decisions without any challenge. Dentists want themselves surrounded with "Yes-Women" who will always agree with them. Loyalty to dentists means obedience.

In fact, obedience is an undeclared yet overpowering force in the culture of most dental practices. Look who gets the biggest raises. Look who makes it to the inner circle. And look who is sanctioned with authority in a practice – the "loyal" staff member.

Dentists think it is much easier to get things done when people know their marching orders and debate and disagreement are kept off the table. Staff meetings turn into elaborate agreement sessions. But the costs are far too high. New ideas are never expressed. And all opportunities for real improvement are squashed.

Why do dentists seek obedience? Dentists believe that obedience will produce control, assuming control will reduce stress and anxiety by eliminating conflict, confrontation and disagreement. Dentists fail to realize that *control displaces trust*. The more control requested, the less trust available. So the more obedience demanded by the dentist, the less trust present between the dentist and the staff.

Ultimately a culture of obedience causes good people to leave. You'd be much better off by encouraging thinking and behavior of disloyalty. In this culture, people will tell you what you don't want to hear – the truth about the way things are – like the way you look first thing in the morning without mascara and lip gloss. And being able to have this level of interaction requires trust, not loyalty.

Creating a culture that recognizes the difference between trust and loyalty isn't easy. It requires you to have a thick skin and a tolerance for a certain kind of messiness. But I can tell you that good employees bolt because they are unwilling to work in an obedience culture – not because they are tempted by the offer from the dentist up the block.

It may be time for you to replace the warm light of loyalty with the cold light of truth. It goes both ways. Your staff needs to trust you enough to tell you the truth and be honest with you, and you need to trust them enough to listen.

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW WILL KILL YOUR PRACTICE!

I don't understand why I can't motivate my staff. They are less than enthusiastic about the practice. It feels like they are only here for the paycheck.

When it comes to team building, you name it, I've tried it. I've done programs on leadership and management. I've hired consultants. We've done team building programs together. I have had bonus systems. Rewards. Trips. But no matter what I try, nothing seems to work. Sure, right after the consultant leaves or we walk out of a program, we perform like a team. But within a month, we're back to the same old stuff.

I've looked everywhere to find the answer. I really want to find out why I can't get my staff to be committed to the success of the practice. I want to know why my staff can't, or won't, perform as a team.

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Do you really want to find out why your staff doesn't respond to you, your leadership or your management? Do you really want to see why they don't hold you in high regard? Do you really want to reveal why they only see their work as a J-O-B? Are you really certain you want to find out?

And what if you do find out? What will do about it? If you do find out, will you confront the issues? If you do reveal the underlying damaging perceptions, will you be willing to change to produce the team you envision?

Most dentists live in a world where ignorance is bliss. It's far easier to blame and fault the staff, dentistry and the world, than to be responsible for creating and maintaining a great staff. In regard to generating a high performance team, it's much easier to criticize them or the circumstances than hold yourself responsible for why the practice has an indifferent staff.

If you look closely, you'll see there is always one constant to not being able to generate a high performance team. There is always one element that is forever present. One factor that is invariable. And that one element is YOU. Yes you! So that's where I'd begin.

Now if you are like most dentists, it's much better not to know how the staff really perceives you so you don't have to deal with what you find out. Let me give you a very clear example. We provide online dental practice

management surveys and assessments for our client dentists: Staff Satisfaction, Patient Satisfaction, Dentist Satisfaction, Business Performance, Staff Performance Evaluations, Associate Performance, etc. One of our most powerful survey tools is the Dentist Performance Evaluation.

The Dentist Performance Evaluation is a confidential survey taken by each staff member. The staff, protected by anonymity, assesses the doctor in five fundamental and critical domains: Communication, Leadership, Staff Management, Patient Relations, and Professional Image.

It's straightforward. If the staff perceives the dentist as strong in these domains, then the dentist has a very loyal staff that performs at a very high level. If a dentist has a staff that perceives the dentist as under-performing or failing in any of these areas, the dentist has a staff like yours.

You can find out how the staff sees you and what the staff thinks about you as a leader, manager, practice owner, and clinician. The results of this survey reveal staff perceptions that might undermine your leadership and management. Your job is to confront these perceptions and through communication, commitment and action change these perceptions. Knowing what to work on makes this job very direct; although, it is not always easy or comfortable.

We provide a Report of Findings which explains the results of the survey and contains recommendations for those areas that are under-performing or failing. Additionally, we schedule a 60-90 minute coaching call with a consultant so you can get clear about what the results mean and how to address the staff and make corrections.

Our evidence continues to reveal that improvement in any of these five areas directly impacts staff relations and performance. Improvement in these five areas increases staff loyalty, deepens their commitment and kinship and results in improvement in the bottom line.

This survey has been tested and retested. It is dead-on accurate. Its findings, if addressed by doctor and staff, always produce positive results.

Here are a few sample questions. How do you think your staff would assess you? How do you think your staff would rate you, especially when they know the survey is confidential?

Communicates effectively with all staff members.

Handles conflicts directly.

Consistently provides office leadership.

Does not allow a pecking order.

Has a clear patient philosophy and closely follows it.

Effectively markets the practice.

Works on entire practice having an attractive presentation.

Twenty to thirty percent of each and every dollar you earn goes to the staff. It makes smart business sense that you'd want maximum performance out of this asset. How the staff perceives you as an owner, leader, manager and clinician decides their relationship to you and the practice. Their relationship to you is the greatest determinant in their performance. If you want to find out how your staff perceives you as a practice owner, provider, manager and leader, have your staff take this survey. You'll get your answers point blank.

STAFF WARS

I have a big headache with staff conflicts. I have a staff member who is frustrated that another staff member isn't helping. She also thinks that the other staff member isn't performing her duties. It's a classic case of she said this and she said that. These two staff members have a history of friction. Other staff members have drawn their lines in the sand. "If she quits then I'm quitting," is the phrase of the day. Do I let one go or both?

What do I do?

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Yep, you got a problem. And it's a problem common to many dentists. The bottom line is you need to bring them both in your office and put them at choice.

They can choose 1) to work it out. Or they can choose 2) either one or both of them gets fired. The choice is up to them.

You can only manage people who are responsible. And responsibility begins with choice. Every choice has a consequence. Respond with a "Yes," there's a consequence. Respond with a "No," there's a consequence. Either way there will be a consequence.

Blame and fault are the antithesis of responsibility. So if they are blaming each other, then they are not responsible. When they make it the other person's fault, they are not responsible. When they make the other person wrong, they are not responsible. Responsibility means you hold yourself as "cause" in the matter.

So, if you have to direct, instruct, order or command them in this situation – you put yourself in the position of being responsible. And that may be the way it turns out if they are unwilling to choose. Then you'll need to decide what you want to do; 1) nothing, 2) fire one or 3), fire both.

If they choose to work it out, they'll need to settle their issues. This may require facilitation. You need to be either willing to facilitate their interaction or, if not, get some outside assistance (consultant, mediator or facilitator). However, if you choose to facilitate this interaction – Be Prepared!

First, I suggest you offer them the choice, either Choice One or Choice Two. Let them know if they choose Choice Two, which is to not work it out, one or both will be gone. Not only gone, but gone without references or recommendations and gone without severance pay. Ask them to consider these two options and get back to you in 24 hours.

Next, you need to look at your own responsibility in the matter. You let this go on. You enabled this breakdown by not speaking up and "hoping it would get better on its own." Plain and simple, you chickened out. I'll bet that if you had intervened earlier, it would not have come to this. In fact, I'll bet you recognized this situation weeks or months ago and avoided saying anything. This is your consequence for not speaking up. The cost is high.

The cost is your well being, your future, your power, your production and new patients, your staff morale. What you don't see are the benefits you get from not speaking up when you should have.

The benefits are you didn't need to take a risk, you didn't have to be responsible as a leader and manager, you didn't have to be uncomfortable, you get to be right and make them wrong, you get to avoid being rigorous, demanding and straightforward.

Learn your lesson here and speak up sooner. If you don't, this will happen over and over again.

MOVING STAFF TO HIGH PERFORMANCE

I have finally had enough. I find myself angry with my staff a lot. There are just too many times I see staff members not doing their jobs. I see them goofing off, doing personal stuff, chatting or simply not paying attention. I don't see them fully attentive to patients. I don't see them reaching out to help each other out. I don't see them strongly focused on doing their work.

Staff members appear to be totally focused on themselves and not on the practice. Hygienists are always complaining about pay. Forget that they come in just in the nick of time and leave exactly at 5:00 PM. Assistants seem somewhat indifferent about the quality of their work, having the operatories fully ready or being on time. But in our location, ads for staff can run for weeks, even months. Forget about finding a good employee, just finding an employee is difficult.

I don't know how to tackle this problem. I'm stuffing my anger and not saying anything. But they know I'm upset. I really don't know what else to say to them to turn it around. What are your recommendations?

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Actually the recommendation is straightforward – open your mouth and speak.

What's missing that you can't speak? What's stopping you from communicating to your staff?

What's stopping you is you are afraid to say something. You live in fear. You are immobilized by fear, which restrains you from talking to your staff and making direct and powerful requests.

What are you afraid of?

There are three fears that run you and stop you from communicating. Fear of conflict. Fear of not looking good. And fear of making things worse. Yet without straightforward communication, staff relationships will always become combative and self-centered, results will implode and you will feel isolated.

The solution I suggest is not to be a corrective parent or a domineering boss. Both do more harm than good. Making people wrong only produces a

temporary fix. Abuse, intimidation, humiliation and rage never get the job done, nor does fear or bribery work either.

Consultants will tell you, "You need to be assertive. You need to stand up and really express yourself. You must stop being passive." That's not my advice.

When you look, being assertive is about you, and not about them. Being assertive inherently sets up a win-lose or zero sum game. Sure, you feel a lot better about yourself, but it doesn't produce effective action or teamwork in others. So I don't coach people in assertiveness training. Maybe it's a great life-skill, but it's a terrible management practice.

I coach people in what I call "committed communication." A communication model not based on you, but based on them. The goal of the committed communication model is to hold people to their highest selves. To insist that people operate with integrity, demand that people operate as their word and to require people behave ethically, play as a team, and be for others. Committed communication is not for you – it's for your staff and their own self-worth and development.

Committed communication is about seeing people as they want to be, addressing them with dignity and high regard, insisting they operate as their highest selves.

That means you approach staff with respect in a highly ethical manner, in a supportive and encouraging way. You actively listen with empathy. You ask questions that are on point. You ask open-ended questions. You relate respectfully, in partnership, insisting on accountability.

If you communicate in this way, staff will behave and deliver in a way that is more consistent with high performance and team. In my world-view, you create yourself and your world in your speaking. How you are thinking, which is speaking to yourself, and how you are talking to the staff, which implicitly tells them they "suck," is producing the outcome you have – a fragmented, self-centered, underperforming staff. It's the old self-fulfilling prophesy.

Don't you yourself want to be addressed as a highly competent and caring professional? Don't you want to be talked to as an intelligent, committed and successful person? Don't you want to operate as you envision your best self? Well, don't you?

Why is staff any different?

So change your lenses and look at staff in a new way. Address them as who they want to be – not who you think they are. You don't need to be assertive or severe. You need to demand they operate consistent with their highest values, vision and commitments – then hold them to these values, vision and commitments. See what that gives you. More importantly, see what it does for them.

The real definition of management is not only getting work done through people, but developing people through work. If staff people have the opportunity to grow, to develop and to attain the ability to operate as their highest selves, you will have a tremendous crew who won't abandon ship.

CAPTAIN JACK & READING THE WAKE

I am never sure how to really evaluate an employee. I sometimes use performance reviews, but that doesn't give me the kind of information I need to make a decision. For example, I have an assistant, Emily, who has been with me for three years. I am not sure if I should keep her or let her go. In some areas she is a decent performer. But in other areas, she doesn't perform nearly as well.

What's a good way to decide whether to keep someone or let them go?

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Years ago I learned about boating. In the late 80s I had a houseboat on Lake Union in Seattle. I also had a 14-foot cruiser with a belligerent in-board out-board motor docked right alongside the houseboat. Being from South Philly, I had zero boating experience and I knew I had to learn something about it.

Down on my dock, there was a seasoned sailor, Jack McFarland, Captain Jack as I came to call him. Captain Jack was in his late 60s, spent his life on boats and totally fit the mold of a cantankerous, weathered sailor. I negotiated a deal with Captain Jack to be my teacher. "Arrr."

Many times, Captain Jack had me sit on the aft of the boat and watch the wake. He also made me watch the wake of other boats. He said you could tell everything about a boat and the way it was being handled by watching the wake. "The wake tells you everything boy. Watch the damn wake!" You could always count on Captain Jack asking; "What does that wake tell you?"

If a boat was going in a straight line, you knew the boat was steadily on course and the captain was paying attention. If it was wavering, you knew something was out of whack. If the boat was sailing smooth and flat, you knew something about the speed of the boat. If the boat was deep in the water, you also could tell about its speed. Captain Jack taught me to read the wake because when you understand the wake, you understand the boat and its captain.

I have found the same to be true of people. As a person works in a practice, she leaves a wake behind her. And just with any wake, there are two sides to a wake that someone leaves behind when moving through a practice. One side of the wake is the job or tasks. The other side is the relationships. When a

person travels through a practice for a few months or years, she leaves a “wake” behind in these two areas, tasks and relationship. And you can tell all about the person by the wake she leaves.

In terms of the task, what does Emily's wake look like? Is it a wake of goals being reached? Is it a wake of complete work? Is she directly contributing to the mission being fulfilled? Is she figuring out the best way of doing things? Is she making what she does better than it was before?

Or is there a different kind of wake?

Are goals not achieved? Are there continual misfires? Is the mission not accomplished? Is there a lack of completion? Is there disorganization and chaos? Inactivity? Nothing happening? Lack of focus? False starts? Resources and money lost?

You can tell from the wake the level of performance and results. In practice, results matter. They are the stuff on which you evaluate your staff. Results are what bring your vision into reality. At the end of the day, what kind of results from her tasks did she leave behind her? The wake is the record she leaves behind her.

On the other side of the wake are the relationships. Just as she leaves the effects of her work behind her in results, she leaves the effect of her interactions with people behind in their hearts, minds and spirit. She leaves a wake as she moves through the lives of her coworkers. She leaves a wake as she moves through the lives of patients. And she leaves a wake as she touches your life. What does that wake look like?

Are people uplifted, smiling and having a great time as she moves through their lives? Are they better off or worse off? Do they consider her a blessing or a curse? What is the nature of her wake? Are coworkers and patients smiling or reeling? Does her relationship enhance others' performance or take away from their performance?

So check out Emily's wake and decide. The wake tells you all you need to know. Aye matey, might be time to have Emily walk the plank!

GETTING STAFF TO DO THE RIGHT THINGS

I've been in practice four and half years. I'm not doing as well as I thought I would be at this stage of practice. I'm basically just getting by. One major problem is the same issues keep on recurring with my staff: personal phone calls, lateness, gossip, back-stabbing, weak performance, indifference, blame and complaining. I'm at my wits end.

I've fired and hired some new people, but that doesn't seem to change anything. Initially it seems to work, but after a short while, it's back to the way it has always been.

How do I get my staff to do the right things?

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In my years of consulting, I have witnessed a great number of dentists generating miraculous results. According to the dictionary, a miracle is an event in reality beyond and out of the ordinary. My observation is these miraculous results are not genetic but environmental. What I have found is the secret to a great practice is great staff performance and great staff performance is a result of "alignment."

Alignment requires you remove from your practice all the stuff that is inconsistent with your vision, your passion and your goals. And by the way, that includes people. Sounds harsh. Sorry, I can't help that. It is the way it is.

Bottom Line: You bring into your practice everything that supports who you are and what you want to create. Choose wisely. But remember, this is a process, not a light switch. It's tough and it takes time.

Your actions, intention and attention should be paid to generating and maintaining alignment. There are lots of ways to build alignment. Some dentists hire consultants like me to assist them in building alignment. Others use CE programs, books, software, study clubs and the Internet. But no matter what model or method you use, building alignment is the one element always present in highly successful practices.

Pick a behavior you don't like going on in your practice, one that you'd like to get rid of, one that just keeps showing up again and again. Look and list everything in your practice environment that rewards and promotes this behavior. This includes "your" actions as a leader and a manager toward this

behavior. Now list all the things that would block or thwart this behavior. My bet, and I haven't lost this bet in 20 years, you'll find the first list a lot longer than the second list.

Now, pick a behavior you like, something that's really important for practice success that isn't happening enough. Do the same analysis. You'll invariably find the list of things blocking that behavior a lot longer than the list of things that promote that behavior.

You see, it's all about the payoffs. You are unconsciously reinforcing or sabotaging staff behaviors and making it much harder to achieve your goals. The trick is to get your message and your incentives aligned with the behaviors you really want.

Here's an example. I have few orthodontist-clients in Oregon and Nevada that love to play golf. When I ask them why they play golf, they tell me they play the game for peace of mind, to relax, to be with nature, to hang out with friends, to be themselves, to let go. But these guys take lessons. When I talk to the pro who gives some of them their lessons, and ask the same question, the pro tells me they say things like stop my slice, fix my short game, improve my score, get me more power – all the things that golfers want.

Their first answer has to do with enjoyment. The second answer focuses on what is wrong with their game. In golf as in dental practice, there is a problem when goals are not aligned with meaning. There is pretense. There is hypocrisy. There is a real disconnect between speaking and action, which reveals a lack of integrity.

I understand it takes tremendous commitment, discipline and courage to continuously engage in generating alignment. It's so much easier to sell out and just accept the easy, safe, non-threatening, avoid-conflict routine. But as a business owner, as a leader and as an executive manager, your job, your accountability as an owner is to align meaning, thinking and action.

You need to really understand what I'm saying here. You need to understand this challenge of keeping things aligned never ends – never. But if you want success, if you want high performance from your staff, you better suck it up and get your team aligned. And don't be afraid to show them the door if they're not buying in.

It's really very simple in my view. When the integrity is in, miraculous results get produced. Integrity occurs when what you say, what you mean, and how

you act are totally aligned. So my coaching is become demanding, arduous, unrelenting about integrity in your office. But that must include rigorously holding yourself to your word – no matter what. If you can do this, if you can sustain this discipline, if you don't waver, I can promise you the results in staff performance.

LIAR, LIAR, PRACTICE ON FIRE

I find myself unable to be honest with my staff. I have it clear in my head what I want to say, but I never do. When I talk to the staff, either individually or at staff meetings, I am not really straight or direct with them. I understate, mollify and lie. When I do this, I feel terrible about myself.

Why do I lie to my staff? Why can't I just be brutally honest?

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It's pretty clear why we lie. We lie because of fear. We lie as a solution to our fear, our fear of how somebody will react to a truth we may tell them. We lie because we are afraid we will have to cope with someone's negative or emotional reaction to us. We lie because we're afraid we'll cause an upset and incur the disturbing reactions that come with it.

The payoff of lying is clear. We lie because it's safer. We lie so as to reduce the risk. We lie to keep the status-quo the status-quo, because we at least know what the status quo is. We lie to get us off the hook. We lie so we can avoid being held to account to our commitments as an owner. We lie because it is politically correct and won't put us in any form of jeopardy. We lie so we can blame others and not be responsible ourselves. We lie because it's easier than telling the truth.

But you and I know the cost of lying. It costs us our integrity. It costs us our self-worth. It costs us our power. It costs us our well being. It costs us our relationship with that person and without a relationship in place, it costs us any future with that person.

If you want an employee who isn't lied to in your relationship, then she'd better be a person who can respond and not react to unwelcome news. But the same holds true for you. That means from the very beginning of your relationship, from the moment she sits down across the desk for the interview, you tell her the truth. And she needs to know that it's safe to tell you the truth. In this way, you establish a reality in your staff member's experience that it is productive rather than destructive to be honest with each other.

As the leader, manager and owner of your practice, you need to get through your fear about your staff's reaction to your truths. You need to have courage and be willing to step into all sorts of fears – they may not like you,

they might find it upsetting, they may judge you, they may quit, they may think you are a terrible person.

Believe me, I appreciate that you are afraid your staff will withdraw their affection, their kinship, their affinity, their support and commitment. I appreciate these fears may, in fact, be based on past real experiences. But so what! The costs are far too high not to be straight with your staff. Is it really worth it not to take the risk?

As difficult as it may seem, you need to tell the truth. It's the only thing that will work in the long run. Lying may give you what you want in the short run - safety, being left alone, the status-quo, but lying is simply reactive and never ultimately satisfying. You need to have the courage to stop going for safety and comfort and go instead for what will work. Telling the truth will get you long term satisfaction and significantly enhance your power.

Every time you lie, you reinforce the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and feelings about the other person and yourself (who you consider yourself to be that has to lie). So my coaching is make a list of the people you lied to in your practice. Sit them down, and tell them the truth (If you want a little coaching on how to ignite the process of truth-telling, e-mail me. We have trained hundreds of dentists in "how to say the hard things to staff.")

Any act of avoidance of a fear reinforces the fear. Any time you act out of fear, it keeps the fear alive. When you lie out of fear, your fear persists. Is that the way you want to be with your staff? Afraid? Is that the way you want to be in your practice?

Give yourself the biggest gift possible for New Years. Give yourself the gift of the truth. My promise is if you have the guts to do this, your integrity and power will be restored and you will be much more effective in leading, in owning and in managing your practice as a successful business.

As Mark Twain is quoted as saying; "Courage is resistance of fear, mastery of fear, not the absence of fear." It is always, and I mean always, an existential leap of courage to open your mouth and speak the truth. But that courage is often the difference between a highly successful practice-owner and one who is not.

POWER STARTS WITH CLARITY

I've always had problems with my staff. High turnover, poor performance, and lack of team spirit are characteristic. Now, it's worse than ever with bickering, gossip and back-stabbing. The front and the back are at war. How do I get my staff to change their behavior and attitude so I don't have these problems?

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When problems are seemingly intractable and you are confused and struggling to resolve them, I suggest you address your problems by generating "clarity."

Clarity is having a specific image about what you want. When most dentists have a problem, all they know is what they don't want. And they may only have a vague idea of what they do want.

If I ask you, "What is it you want?" and that you describe it in vivid detail, how would you respond? Would your description of "what you want" be tangible, clear, specific? Would your answer explain to me exactly how what you want would be measured? Would your response tell me in precise fashion, how it would feel when you got what you want?

Most likely not!

More than likely you'd respond in vague generalities, which means you have no idea what you want. All you have is a very specific image of what you don't want. You don't realize that holding images of what you don't want renders you powerless.

I'll bet you spend most of your time trying to manage or eliminate what you don't want. No power can exist in this context. Even if you liberate yourself of what you don't want, you will still be without what you do want since you have no idea what that is.

In your case, you want a staff that doesn't fight, doesn't back-stab, and gets along. You are upset with the front and back being divided and bickering. You probably feel your patients are being mishandled because of this rift. That's what you don't want. What do you want?

Here's another example. A senior doc has an associateship that isn't working. He brought on the associate based on what he didn't want. He didn't want to be on call 24/7. He didn't want to be under so much stress given the business of his practice. He didn't want the pressure of not being able to see a new patient for 6 to 8 weeks. He didn't want the strain of managing the staff himself. He didn't want the burden of ownership, making all the decisions by himself. He brought on an associate based on what he didn't want. He never thought about what he wanted. He wasn't clear on the future he wanted to have emerge, only those things he didn't want in his future. It's no wonder most associateships fail.

Clarity is about what you want. All my clients who get what they want start with generating a clear picture of what it is exactly they want. The kind of power my clients seek is the power that serves rather than abuses, and this kind of power requires clarity.

Let's try this exercise. Take a chronic, unresolved problem and rather than telling me what you don't want, describe to me precisely what you do want.

What would it look like if your staff were a high performance team?

How would they communicate with each other?

How would they support each other?

What would their accountabilities look like?

How would you measure their performance?

You see what I'm getting at? You haven't a clue what it would look like, you only know what you don't want it to look like.

One thing about a good business coach is he or she would work with you so that you could fully and clearly articulate what you want. Sure you'd begin with what you don't want. But you can't have it unless you can see it clearly, once you can envision it, once you can clearly visualize it.

It's just like your dentistry. If you can't clearly envision the final result after your diagnosis, you can't make a compelling offer to the patient. Without clarity you have no power, so they most likely will not accept your treatment recommendations. Same on the business side of the house. No clarity, no power.

YOU DON'T NEED TO MOTIVATE A MOTIVATED STAFF

I have always had difficulty motivating my staff. What are the keys to making it happen?

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There are libraries of books, reams of articles, endless DVDs and CDs, Podcasts and streaming video about motivating staff. But if you really want to understand how great practices crack this code, you need to look much deeper. My particular view about how to produce and maintain a highly motivated staff resides in the relationship between the staff and the practice.

You can't have motivation without a special relationship existing between the staff and the practice. Simply put, the staff has to love the practice.

Staff loves a practice when they feel valued, acknowledged, appreciated and known. When the staff can see a future in which they themselves have real opportunities to grow and develop. When they feel great about what they do, whom they do it with and where they're going. Then, they love the practice. If any of these elements are missing, you'll never (and I mean never ever) motivate your staff.

Everything else that makes a practice extraordinary – leading edge dental services incorporating the latest technologies, fabulous relations with vendors and suppliers, a whiz-bang Website, outstanding clinical gurus and mentors, digital radiography, flat screen monitors in every operator, Italian décor throughout, mood lighting, outstanding business advisers and consultants, well tested business systems and structures, solid policies and procedures, state-of-the-art computing systems, warm scented facial washcloths – doesn't count. Success always comes down to who does the work of the practice, day in and day out and that's the staff. What makes a practice great is a great staff.

Now I'm speaking about more than "happy" employees. There are plenty of happy staff members in practices that don't have this kind of mojo. It isn't just about the compensation, perks and benefits, as important as they might be. There's something else shaping the work environment, something that promotes a profound sense of belonging. Staff feels a kind of psychic ownership of the practice.

Staff doesn't just work here, they *belong* here. They feel a deep sense of responsibility for the success and future of the practice. As I work with clients, if staff doesn't have this relationship with the practice, the practice will never be great and the staff will never be motivated – no matter how many bonus systems you throw at them or all-expense-paid trips you promise.

Several key elements create this kind of ownership relationship. One, the staff never doubts that the practice, the dentist, and the other staff members care about them personally. Each staff person knows that the dentist and the other staff members will stand by them through thick and thin as long as they hold up their end of the bargain.

Second is integrity. If you fail to honor yourself as your word, if you don't do everything you can to keep your promises, if you are at all hypocritical and pretentious, staff will not trust you. No trust, no unconditional commitment. No unconditional commitment, no sense of wanting to be responsible. You must, at all times, walk the talk.

Last, articulating, constantly demonstrating and being a dental practice with a higher purpose. A purpose that is constantly reflected in the kind of work the practice does, the way the practice does its business, and the recognizable good it provides from delivering its dentistry. No matter how the higher purpose is framed, it serves the same function – it makes the work of staff meaningful, it makes them feel that their contribution matters and it motivates them to give their best effort.

In great practices, the higher purpose is a constant expression. It is not a mission statement that is talked about once a year or a vision statement you run up the flagpole at annual meetings. The higher purpose is a thread that is woven into the fabric of the practice and shows up in how it operates each and every day. The higher purpose is a constant presence which people never lose sight of and never forget about.

If you can create this kind of environment in your practice, you will have a practice where staff knows they are interrelated and in charge and no one is looking over their shoulder. Where the staff knows everyone is counting on them. Where staff feels trusted and knows that if they run up against a problem, they are safe to talk about it because they are part of a *higher purpose*.

If you can create this kind of environment in your practice, then you don't need to motivate staff because the staff will already be motivated.

YOU GET WHAT YOU ASK FOR

Over my 11 years in practice, I have never had a staff that does things right. I've hired consultants, facilitators, communication specialists, psychologists, taken courses, fired, hired – you name it, I tried it. I just can't seem to get the staff to do the right things. In fact, most of the time I find myself correcting them because they did it wrong.

I'm tired of my staff not doing things right. I'm tired of having to micromanage them. I'm upset that I can't find good people who want to do their job right.

What do I need to do get my staff to perform like winners, not losers? I know if I had a good staff my revenue would be much higher, I'd have more new patients and I'd have a lot fewer headaches.

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The universe always gives you what you ask for. So when you make the staff wrong, the universe gives you what you ask for – a staff that does things wrong.

The universe responds by providing a fitting response to your declaration. The universe consistently answers back; "Hey, you want a staff that does things wrong, no problem. I can handle that. I'll make sure the staff does stuff so they are wrong. Here you go."

Making your staff wrong for their behavior bolsters and boosts what they do that you see as wrong. Making them wrong keeps them and you stuck, diminishes effective action and weakens the staff's ability to produce results. But remember, you're getting exactly what you are asking for.

Why do you do it? Why do you make the staff wrong? First and foremost, making the staff wrong makes you right. People would rather be right than happy. You would rather be right than change. Making your staff wrong takes you off the hook because you can blame them and fault them. You can make them responsible. You can be the victim.

In your situation, by making the staff wrong, you are making them responsible for the poor performance and outcomes of your practice. The staff is your reason for why your results stink. They are the cause of the lack of new patients. Meanwhile you get to be the poor little powerless good guy.

Making your staff wrong diminishes your power since it expands your view that you cannot do anything to enable and empower your staff. In other words, making your staff wrong diminishes you, reduces your capacity to do something about it. Ultimately, it devalues who you are. It squeezes down your self-esteem.

Making your staff wrong extracts leadership from your being. Leaders speak a future that's possible, a future that will make a difference. Yes, they want to right a wrong, but they define the wrong so they can dedicate themselves to making it right. They don't define the wrong so they can make themselves right.

You wouldn't like me as your coach in the least. I wouldn't let you get away with this thinking and behavior. Your staff doesn't need to be fixed – you do!

By your thinking and actions, the staff does things you see as wrong. They have no other choice. You know the "reap what you sow" business. First you must understand you are cause in the matter. You are the one making this happen. You are the one that has them doing things to be wrong so you can be right. That's your first step. Take responsibility for the way the staff performs. A good coach doesn't blame his players when the team loses. He takes responsibility for how the team played.

Once you assume responsibility, then there are numbers of action steps possible that would change staff behavior and performance. But no change is possible without a change in you. And the change begins with you: accept responsibility and stop making them wrong. If you can't do that, no matter what you do, what you try, who you hire to "fix them," it will always fail.

WRONG, WRONG, WRONG

I was really upset last week when my hygienist left an hour early. She left when she found out her last patient cancelled without letting me or my assistant know. She just announced it to the front desk and left.

We were having one of those crazy days. When she left I still had two emergencies sitting nervously in the waiting room, 30 minutes behind and I had one front desk out sick. How could she just leave and not help out? I really got angry.

When she came in the next day I "blasted" her. She has been sullen and repressed ever since. Now I'm worried she's going to quit.

What else could I have done?

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You made her "bad" and "wrong." When you make someone bad and wrong, they invariably justify why they took the action they did – since they don't want to be bad and wrong.

When you make someone wrong, they respond by resisting being responsible. When you make someone wrong, they unconsciously blame you for why they did what they did. "He's such a jerk," or "The rest of the staff doesn't appreciate me."

When you make someone wrong, there are always consequences – even though they ARE wrong. Making someone wrong doesn't work. Making someone wrong always results in a situation where they will not be responsible, they will turn around and make you wrong, and they will blame you for why they did what they did. So as a manager, when you make someone wrong, you make matters worse not better. You may feel better at the moment because you "got it off your chest," but it doesn't produce the outcome you are looking for.

Before you blast a staff member, before you make them bad and wrong, let me recommend a model of communication that works. I suggest you use this model to produce results and move them to take appropriate action.

Open with your own statement of responsibility. In other words, take responsibility for her poor performance. *I'm not sure what I am doing*

wrong as a leader and manager, but whatever it is, it's not working. I'm just not getting the job done with you in that you didn't realize leaving early doesn't work.

By taking responsibility yourself, you allow them the space to take responsibility for themselves. You can't manage people who are not responsible. It all begins with responsibility. When you make them wrong, when you try to make them feel bad by using guilt, when you blame them, when you fault them, you invariable extract responsibility not expand it.

Next, ask her what you can do as a manager and leader to have her see that staying and assisting others is what you want to communicate. *What am I not doing as a leader and manager, what am I not saying, that would instill this kind of team perspective in you?*

Again, you are standing in responsibility. You are not blaming or faulting her. You are not applying guilt. You are not making her wrong. By asking the question, she is now going to look from responsibility – you're shifting where she is standing.

After she answers your question, repeat her answer so she knows she's been heard. Then ask her "what happened" that she didn't realize or didn't recognize the need to stay around and help out." Listen. Again, repeat back what you heard them say.

Now ask her for a declaration, promise or request.

You see if you can move people to first be responsible and then have them make legitimate commitments, you'll get your job done as a manager.

MAKING IT REAL

I have regular staff meetings and I always have a morning huddle. We go over the numbers. We set goals and targets. We review the operations and what needs to be corrected to make things work better. However, these meetings rarely produce the outcomes and results I want. Why?

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Much of my work is about coaching people to speak in a way that makes a difference. The way you and many dentists speak about what is going on in the practice leaves the staff indifferent, apathetic, and unresponsive. You report activities or numbers in a way that leaves your staff uninspired. If you're going to speak to your staff, formulate your speaking in a way that makes an impact.

In Stephen Covey's book, *The 8th Habit*, he describes a poll of 23,000 employees drawn from a number of companies and industries. He reports the poll's findings:

- o Only 37 percent said they have a clear understanding of what their organization is trying to achieve and why.
- o Only one in five was enthusiastic about their team's and organization's goals.
- o Only one in five said they had a clear "line of sight" between their tasks and their team's organization's goals.
- o Only 15 percent felt their organization fully enables them to execute key goals.
- o Only 20 percent fully trusted the organization they work for.

This is pretty sobering. It's also very abstract. After you read this information, you may walk away thinking, "There's a lot of dissatisfaction and confusion in these companies." But the way it is reported, the way it is spoken, generates no real emotional impact. There is no call to action. There is no wonderment about what can be done to change it. Likely there is just a sense of discouragement and resignation, and in a few minutes all of these stats will soon be forgotten.

Covey follows these statistics and superimposes a human metaphor over them: "Let's say a soccer team had these same scores. Only 4 in 11 of their players on the field would know which goal is theirs. Only 2 of 11 would care. Only 2 out of 11 would know what position they play and know exactly what they are supposed to do. And all but two players, in some way, would be competing against their own team rather than the opponent."

I'll say it again: Context is decisive. By shifting the context from statistical analysis to a human condition, you hear the same information in a totally different way. And that's what you need to figure out how to do it (speak it) when you report to your staff. Speak it in a way that gives it a "human context."

Staff cannot connect to numbers alone. You need to connect the numbers, the stats, or the underperforming activities to match or touch something human so they can embrace what you are saying.

Whether you're talking to staff or patients, begin to speak in a way that really hits home. "You have extensive distal caries on number 30 that should be addressed immediately or you might need a root canal."

Or "You have a large cavity on the back of your first molar that if left untreated will most likely cost you the tooth?" Which one grabs you?

"Your job description is clear on room set up, tray set up and seating patients. Please follow the protocol."

Or "Keeping patients waiting makes them apprehensive and more nervous than they already are. Every minute we're late raises their anxiety level another notch." Which one will most likely move the assistant to action?

The more you can deliver your speaking to fit experiences that people have, the more they will hear what you have to say. As an exercise this week, try to design "human" conversations around your numbers and deliver it that way to the staff and see what that gives you.

THE MASTERY COMPANY

We don't work from the outside in. We work from the inside out. Our years of experience, our successes and our failures, have taught us that it's much more about **who** you are than **what** you know or even what you do.

Systems, structures, protocols, budgets, employee manuals, job descriptions, flow charts, goals, and targets are important. And we provide these materials and models with our programs. But if that were all dentists needed to be successful, a lot more dentists would be successful. That's what makes our work so unique. We know that success begins within you.

Using our proven coaching and consulting technologies, we are able to transform who you are so that you become a commanding leader, a highly effective manager, a powerful owner and a great marketer. If you're already good, we'll make you great. If you're already great, we will make you even better.

THAT'S WHAT MAKES OUR WORK SO POTENT.

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE, BUT IT IS TRUE

I am considering hiring a practice management consultant. Nearly all of the consultants I am previewing cost between \$25,000 and \$40,000 for a one-year program. I've talked to my peers, and those who use you, swear by you.

However, your costs are so much less than all the others. This makes me very suspicious. You know what they say, "If it's too good to be true, it's too good to be true." Why is there such a discrepancy in cost between you and the other practice management consultants?

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Thanks for asking. I love this question!

Business is business. Your dental practice is a business. What are the ends any business owner wants to achieve? Improve their top and bottom line. Have greater peace, grace and ease in recruiting, retaining and managing employees. Have a robust infrastructure that guides and deftly directs the business. Have greater certainty in decision making in critical areas to improve performance. Develop a keen ability to foresee the future and invent strategy and tactics to meet it. Generate abilities to handle conflicts and reduce upsets. Enhance competitive competencies to continually succeed in their market. Continuously improve their abilities as an owner, leader, manager and marketer. Increase the asset value of the business for higher resale value. All these are universal ends of any business. My job is to educate, train and develop dentists to achieve these ends.

However, the "means" to produce these ends is a whole other story.

Knowing the ends of any business, and having consulted numbers of businesses besides dental practices, including IT, software and Internet companies, I recognized early that digitization can dramatically reduce costs. Today, you can make local and long distance calls at no cost with Skype. You can book your own travel and save hundreds of dollars using Priceline.com or Travelocity.com. JetBlue, Men's Warehouse, Wal-Mart and IKEA use state of the art technologies that significantly reduce their costs structure and thus can profit from lower costs. New technologies can be used to crush costs and that's what we've done.

Here are a few examples. Ten years ago, it would cost us around \$400 to write, publish and mail a monthly newsletter. Now we create a no-cost, no subscription fee, high-volume electronic newsletter on a weekly basis. Just as important, we get immediate feedback from readers, allowing us to better understand our market and their needs.

We used to offer practice/business assessments; traveling to dental offices, interviewing staff and dentists to find out what was going on. Five years ago our company developed a suite of user-friendly, scientifically valid online surveys and assessments; from staff performance reviews to staff satisfaction surveys, from patient satisfaction surveys to associate performance reviews. With these online tools we can now generate a powerful assessment of what is actually occurring in the practice. Again, this saves the client thousands of dollars since there is no travel/direct costs for the consultant and no down time for the practice. Just point and click.

Four years ago we developed an online budget and employee policy manual that our clients can easily reformat, edit to fit their office and then capture to their hard drive. We assist clients in developing strategic plans in PowerPoint which they can present to staff and peers and upgrade on a routine basis.

My primary consulting program, *Mastery of Practice*, used to be delivered in hotel meeting rooms with five 1½-day sessions, each session occurring 6 to 8 weeks apart. In today's dollars, given travel, direct costs and materials, the program would be priced at around \$39,000 per participant. The Mastery program is now delivered totally electronically via e-mail, our exclusive Website technology, online surveys and assessments. The coaching and education is delivered via private 30-minute coaching calls and group conference calls each month. The program produces better and more sustained results for the client, at half the cost of the lower end of your range. We will be starting our 20th online Mastery program soon – guess that's the best validation of the success of our technology.

By using our own intranet, we continually consolidate information into available knowledge to constantly innovate new ways in cost reductions for both our clients and ourselves. All our backroom functions are automated, saving hundreds of hours and tons of money. These saving are then passed onto our clients. In 1994, I had a staff of seven, an expensive office in Seattle, Washington, and lots of paper. Today I have a staff of one, no office and we

are paperless. Through digitization, automation and a robust Website we have reduced many consulting costs to near oblivion.

Unlike most other consultants, we don't have any "brick and mortar" to support. No pseudo-schools, no edifices, no two to five story glass and steel architectural structures to carry. We don't have numbers of support people to pay. We don't have multiple lines of business to fund and manage. We avoid political shenanigans. We make no attempt to get our picture on the cover of dental rags. We don't have any consultants to support and manage. We have no desire to "dominate" the industry. We have no desire to be the biggest. Our only desire is to be the best.

In our view, a client would prefer not to hassle with travel, get on airplanes, travel hundreds of miles, spend nights in a hotel room, but rather simply pick up the phone in their private office for a couple of 30-minute calls a month and then go home. Our belief is a client would choose to have a full day of production over sitting in some dark seminar room for a few days with 50 other dentists he doesn't know. Our assertion is our clients are self-governing and self-managing. They can learn the material and do the work from our assigned readings, downloads from our Website and e-mails, working on their computers from the office or home – in their own time. Our notion is a client would prefer to sit around a speaker phone at lunch-time with his or her staff rather than have some consultant come in for a day or dragging his entire staff to some hotel for a day and paying them their full day's salary.

Coupling technology with low overhead has proven a great business strategy. You need not look very far to see many examples of the success of this strategy. Ameritrade reduced their overhead by relocating to Nebraska, where real estate prices, local taxes and salary demands are extremely low. Ameritrade's Internet \$9.95 trade price continues to show it is very profitable and the company is making it miserable for giant Morgan Stanley, where their key operations are located in expensive New York and San Francisco.

We have adopted this same business strategy. We've been working at it for years. And we know in our own small way, we're making it miserable for Mercer, Blatchford, Levine, Heartland and others. We don't have a large overhead to pass on to clients. We are always accessible and available electronically. And we are Web-centric so all the materials are located on our exclusive Website.

We can deliver top-of-the-rank consulting for much less than other consultants, and produce incredible results for clients without them leaving their office. In my view, we can deliver the wisdom of the ages through today's technology and produce noteworthy outcomes for clients at a third or fourth of the cost. In fact, we were named a Top Ten Finalist for the prestigious Dell Award for the business who uses technology to totally transform its industry and enhance the customer experience.

Now we realize our consulting technology and methods aren't for everyone but for many dentists it's a darn good fit. I hope that answered your question and addressed your concern.

And again, thanks for asking.

COACHING MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

I am a 47-year-old general practitioner. Two people in my local study club are in the Mastery of Practice program. They have really improved their production, staff performance and, more important, their moods. Those guys have done lots of practice management programs before, have had consultants and have spent lots of time on their businesses. But until recently, nothing has made much of a difference. Now they are doing gang-busters. When I ask why they are doing so well, they say, "Coaching."

What are they talking about? Can you tell me more?

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Pavarotti can't hear himself sing. Tiger Woods can't see himself swing. Andy Roderick can't see himself hit the tennis ball. All professionals know that to improve performance, you need a coach.

Coaching involves a particular kind of relationship and a particular kind of intention. The relationship between a coach and his or her players is special and specific. Both are committed to the players' best performance. Both are committed to winning. Both are committed to team victory. And all of that takes place inside performance's being clearly defined by measurable outcomes and accomplishments.

A coach provides a committed partnership, something dentists generally lack in their practices. Dentists almost always go it alone. They pretend that things are working. They ignore the business side of their practices, claiming, "Everything is fine." But considering the variance in dental practice, where some practitioners have personal incomes well above \$350K a year, but most have incomes far below that, everything is not fine – especially for those on the lower end of the scale.

How does coaching work? A coach empowers you to do those things that must be done. The things you always avoid doing or are afraid to do. For example, confronting an underperforming staff member. Asking patients for referrals. Generating a budget and managing by it. Developing a strategic plan and measuring yourself against it. Calling vendors about overdue supplies. Setting targets and goals. Getting charts done. Having a straight

conversation with your lab. Having a difficult conversation with your associate. You get the point?

A coach interacts with you from the point of view that you can deliver, rather than the one you often look at yourself from, which is that you can't deliver. A coach provides a driving intention for you to stop procrastinating and get those things done that ensure the success of your business. A coach is a pain in your backside about doing the right thing. A coach doesn't buy your excuses. A coach doesn't buy your victim, villain or hopelessness stories.

When we do our surveys – during and after the Mastery course – 96% of the participants say coaching is the most valuable aspect of the program. As one participant put it: “The best part of the program was the coaching. Your coaching had me confront those areas that I had been avoiding. Your coaching had me take actions I knew I needed to take but was reluctant to take. Your coaching pushed me to take risks and get things done. I know that my recent accomplishments were my doing, but it was the coaching that allowed me to accomplish them.”

How do you find a coach for yourself? First, you begin by asking for coaching. If you aren't asking for it, coaching shows up as a bother, an intrusion, an annoyance. I never coach people unless they have requested it. That's the first lesson I learned 25 years ago.

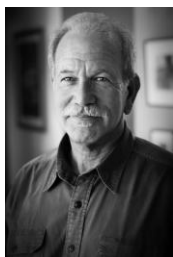
Second, you need to have a relationship with a coach of trust, affinity and kinship – and you must directly experience that those qualities truly exist. You need to feel in your gut that he or she is committed to your success. The coach is going to ask you to do things that you won't want to do, and if the relationship isn't in place, you won't do them.

Third, a good coach has a track record. Good coaches have coached players and teams to winning records – consistently. They know how to get the best out of their players. They also know that every player is different and has his or her own individual needs, strengths and weaknesses.

Fourth, a coach allows you to see differently. Through his or her relationship and communication, a coach allows you to see the field – your practice – so that you are able to play better. Through your interactions with a coach, you also see yourself differently – you “see your own eyes” – and, therefore, can make corrections.

There are lots of people out there who take on the moniker of "coach." Yet, in my view, there are few who have the background of experience, the background of success and the skill set to really coach. If you are interested, do your due diligence. Ask questions. Do interviews. You know the routine. Find a coach who will get the best out of you and who you are certain is totally committed to your success.

Then again, there are a lot of dentists who don't want a coach. Some think they can do it alone, that they don't need anyone else. To me that's arrogant. They'd rather have their reasons than their results. They'd rather be right than happy. When you invite a coach into your world, you are asking for someone to confront, push and enable you to generate high performance that produces results. A coach will require you to change and, as you know, change is uncomfortable and risky. Most dentists would rather be comfortable, even though it isn't giving them what they want. And most dentists want to avoid taking risks. So, be aware that getting a coach will disrupt your comfort and push you to take risks. Are you ready for that?



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Dr. Cooper is President and CEO of The Mastery Company. He has been a consultant to the health care industry for nearly 25 years – at the practice management level as well as at corporate and organizational levels. Prior to his consulting career, Dr. Cooper was an academician, basic science researcher and practicing periodontist.

His consulting clients have included more than 2,000 dentists practicing in solo, partnered and group practices and their corresponding support staffs. Dr. Cooper has also worked with senior executives, managers and supervisors in large health care systems, regional and community hospitals, third-party payers, clearinghouses, biotechnical firms, information technology companies, IPAs, PPOs, DPMs and DHMOs.

Dr. Cooper focuses the majority of his work on dentists in private practice, training and coaching them to achieve mastery as leaders, managers and owners who are able to consistently operate their dental practices as successful businesses.

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