

# Leadership and Legacy



by Paul A. Homoly, D.D.S.

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*Often, the best ideas in dentistry come from ordinary dentists doing extraordinary things. This column will illustrate the extraordinary acts of leadership practiced every day by dentists and team members who love dentistry and love making a difference for their patients.*

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*"You can observe a lot just by watchin."*

—Yogi Berra

Lately I've been looking for leadership books that can help solve one of dentistry's toughest puzzles—why is it so hard for so many dentists to lead their teams?

My search has been disappointing. Yes, there are many authors who have written about leadership—including Lee Iacocca, John C. Maxwell, Stephen Covey, Tom Peters, and Daniel Goleman—but none of them practice dentistry. Why is that important? Because the leadership puzzle in dentistry is different from the one the best-selling authors struggle to fit together. Dentists not only lead the practice, they also fix the teeth, finance the facility, manage the patients and, at times, take out the trash. Of course Iacocca was a great leader, but he didn't get his hands "dirty" working on his products; dentists do. Iacocca didn't spend his own money; dentists do. Iacocca didn't own the companies he led; dentists do.

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During my nearly 30 years of experience as a clinician and a practice development coach, I've observed that those dentists who ultimately were most able to profitably implement surgical restorative procedures with minimal stress were the ones who had the best leadership skills. Having great hands and a keen sense for diagnosis got dentists in the game, but the real winners, the ones who actually made surgical/restorative procedures a big part of their practice, were the ones who knew how to deal with people. Leadership is the core skill

for developing a practice that yields rich fulfillment, a bounty of relationships, and a significant legacy.

What exactly do we mean by *leadership*? Stephen Covey states, in *Principle-Centered Leadership*, that “leadership is the organization of people while management is the organization of things (i.e. systems).” But profit in a dental practice revolves around the dentist doing dentistry, not managing systems. Therefore, a dentist’s ability to organize and motivate others to accomplish objectives is fundamental to profitability. So let’s specifically define leadership in dentistry as organizing and motivating people to effectively merge clinical, organizational, and relationship expertise.

### WHO’S YOUR LEADER?

Imagine the classic science fiction scenario: An alien approaches you and says, “Take me to your leader.” Where would you take them? To the White House? To ADA headquarters? To your family? Who’s your leader? And what about your team? If they had to select their leader, who would they choose? Would you be on their list? Dentists need to ask themselves the following two questions:

- Who’s the leader in my practice?
- Who’s *my* leader?

Dentistry can be isolating. Many dentists (and I was one of them) think they can do it all on their own. This rugged individualism may work in cowboy movies, but it doesn’t work in dentistry. Here’s some great advice I got decades ago: find someone who’s doing what you want to do, and learn from them.

For a few years I had the honor of teaching alongside Dr. James Pride, founder of the Pride Institute, in Novato, California. Dr. Pride called me a “lone ranger” and encouraged me

to surround myself with great people, to seek out mentors. Some ways to do this include the following:

- Do what you’re doing extremely well. Mentors are looking for protégés with talent; they are not looking for marginally competent or unmotivated dentists.
- Look for opportunities to build social relationships with potential mentors—a little bit of friendship goes a long way to opening the door to a great mentoring relationship.
- Stay open to mentoring opportunities; you’ll find mentors in unlikely places and circumstances (I have several clients who initially hired me to help them, and over time they have evolved into excellent mentors/coaches to me).

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*Leadership problems, like one unforeseen pothole after another, if patched with trial-and-error solutions, make your road to success a rough one.*

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### WHO LEADS YOUR PRACTICE?

Recently I called “Shelia” and “Bill,” who recently completed a case acceptance workshop with me. Shelia told me, “Things are going great. When we came back for the workshop we modified our telephone call slip, we’ve role-played the dialogs you taught us, and the hygiene team has practiced the choice and hand-off dialogs and is doing really well. We just sold one of the biggest cases I’ve ever done.” Bill, on the other hand, said, “Well we really haven’t done a lot yet. I don’t think my receptionist understands what I want. She still schedules the old way. I haven’t had too many new patients to try out the new dialogs I learned. Plus, my team

doesn’t like to role-play and our staff meetings aren’t long enough to get everything done.”

Take a guess who leads Shelia’s practice. She does, and has enlisted the support of her team to make things happen. Who leads Bill’s practice? Not him. Both dentists want to do more advanced cosmetic and restorative dentistry. Which one has the greater chance of doing it? The practice with the best leadership.

### GREAT LEADERSHIP LEADS TO GREAT PRACTICES

Your ability to lead your practice affects the dentistry you do, the patients you treat, the team surrounding you, the prosperity you experience, and the legacy you leave. There is minimal emphasis on leadership training in dentistry. You might accumulate hundreds of hours of continuing education (CE) learning the technical side of dentistry, hoping that clinical savvy is your ticket to success. If you’re like most dentists, however, you discover that it is not the clinical issues, which you’ve been so well-trained to deal with, that stall your success. Rather, it’s the leadership issues—motivating team members and patients, developing entrepreneurial skills, communicating with impact, implementing the right vision—that hold you back. Leadership problems, like one unforeseen pothole after another, if patched with trial-and-error solutions, make your road to success a rough one. Sound familiar? You’re not alone.

What you may not have learned in hundreds of hours of CE is a fundamental truth regarding advanced restorative/cosmetic dentistry: the greater the complexity of care, the greater the demand on leadership skills. It is leadership, in combina-

tion with clinical knowledge, that elevates you to the peak of complete dentistry.

### LEGACY

Imagine that today is your last day in practice and you are reflecting on your career. What will you remember, the dentistry or the people? Your greatest legacy will be in the form of relationships, not restorations—your restorations can be duplicated, your relationships cannot. And when you really think it through, it's probably staff members, rather than patients, who will stand out in your memory.

There is much talk about how dentistry can change patients' lives. But have you thought about how dentistry changes the lives of the people who work for you? I'm convinced that it's staff members, not patients, who experience the greatest transformations that occur in the dental office.

Connie Story is a great example of how dentistry transforms those who help deliver it. Connie began working in a dental office right out of high school and recently retired. Here's what she learned working with three world-class dentists: Dr. Peter Dawson, Dr. Hilt Tatum, and Dr. Mark Davis.

"Working with Dr. Dawson was an incredible experience," says Con-

nie. "I started as his chair-side assistant when he was practicing by himself. Soon I realized what I was part of. I assisted him in his seminars and eventually worked the front desk. He gave me recognition and praise, and consequently I developed a real sense of confidence."

"Dr. Tatum taught me that if I wanted to get ahead in life, I had to take some chances. He gave me courage. One day he told me I was going to speak in front of a large audience at the Alabama Implant Congress. He supported me, pushed me in front of the group, and I did great! I had been terribly shy but there was no being shy around Dr. Tatum. He helped me come out of my shell."

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*Have you thought about how dentistry changes the lives of the people who work for you?*

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Connie finished her dental career working in Dr. Davis' office. "He taught me to never assume things, especially when working with patients. He taught me to really think things through before I spoke."

Connie has some valuable advice for dentists in their relationships with staff. "You always need to remember that, like it or not, you are the leader. Your staff watches you and looks to you for advice and leadership. Never

underestimate the effect you have on your staff members—you can make or break the morale. Dentistry is tough and you need all the horses pulling in the same direction, and the dentist is always the lead horse."

World-class dentists get that way by developing the people who work with them. What would your staff members say they learned from working with you? Chances are your greatest legacy in dentistry will not be the restorations you place, but the growth of the people who work with you.

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Consider a new path. Invest in your personal leadership skills. This column seeks to provide the leadership insights and tools you need to take that giant step toward enjoying the practice you deserve. E-mail your best leadership ideas and experiences to [paul@paulhomoly.com](mailto:paul@paulhomoly.com) and help to share them with other members of the AACD. *PH*

