



DENTAL ENTREPRENEUR
BUSINESS BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

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My Story

Emmet Scott

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Get Off Your High Horse: The View is Better From the Bottom

Kyle Bogan, DDS

When I first began my journey in building an engaged dental team that I wanted to lead, I learned an extremely important lesson early on. At first, I started with what I knew – what I had seen so many times before. Having worked in many dental offices prior to owning my own, I saw owners leading from the top. Through the implementation of reactionary policies, these leaders pushed from the top to guide the behaviors of their employees. As a result of seeing this in action, I thought leading from above was the answer. I assumed it was just “how it was done.” Never have I been so wrong. What I learned, almost immediately, was that we were all in the trenches together. People want to be led, not managed. They want to feel valued and appreciated. The success or failure of the office and the team results from our collective efforts. Only through working together to intentionally build a focused and engaged team were we able to succeed. The first thing I had to do was to get off of my high horse and jump into the trenches with my team. The view, as I would find out, is much clearer from the bottom of the ladder.

As I mentioned before, I was indoctrinated into the business side of dentistry through observing owners at the multiple practices where I was an associate dentist throughout the first five years of my career. While styles varied, they all had one thing in common. The owner sat at the top of the organizational hierarchy pushing the staff from the top. This leadership is prevalent throughout the dental profession, and – unfortunately – throughout the general business community as well. Employees are meant to feel subordinate in every way to those in the leadership positions above them so they “know their place,” and all that matters is that the employees “get the job done.” When an owner sits at the top of the business ladder screaming below to their team, “Climb! Climb faster!” I argue that not only do they not see the results that they

want, but they see diminishing returns for their misguided efforts.

Now, I am not advocating that organizations be run without a hierarchy of leadership. A leadership hierarchy is essential in building and scaling a business. Rather, I have experienced that success is achieved when leaders intentionally craft a team-first culture. Everyone must work together, side-by-side, if an organization is going to fulfill its potential. There are several steps that you can take to start moving your team in this transformational direction:

- 1. Keep communication flowing in both directions:** Implementing a constant cadence of communication will ensure that all members of the team have an active role in the operations of the business. While we will never get 100 percent of our teams to agree on any decision that is made, buy-in to the final decision is increased when everyone feels seen and heard.
- 2. Identify the individual communication styles of your team members:** Members of your team communicate differently and prefer to be communicated to in different ways. When leaders and team members alike are aware of the makeup of the communication preferences in their team, efficiency and ease of communication increases. This is essential to growing and scaling your team and your practice.
- 3. Keep an open-door policy that welcomes everyone:** If you make it clear in word and deed that anyone can come talk to you – about anything – because you’re all in this together, they will. This level of vulnerability based trust is essential in building teams.

multiple practices, therefore increasing my demand, and increase my overall daily and monthly production. As a secondary result, that opened up valuable extra days I could use working on other projects or in additional practices, or just having extra time off! The point is, once I set the goal, I was able to take concrete steps to make it happen. Thus, working in reverse can be a great approach to take for many situations.

The alternative option to consider is “going with the flow” and taking things as they come incrementally. It’s certainly the easier and less stressful approach on the front end, and it goes against everything option one preaches. Option one proponents may see option two as another form of laziness; it’s easier to “go with the flow” and see what happens than to be proactive. However, there are also benefits with this approach, many of them illustrated in David Epstein’s book *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*.

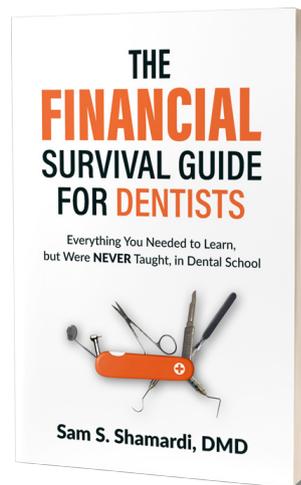
One aspect he shows is that long-term planning can actually hinder your overall progress, as it sets us on a linear and rigid path that we then feel we can no longer stray away from. Our priorities and opinions will change with time, therefore by being more flexible and testing ideas often through trial and error, over the short term, we can actually learn valuable lessons that help shape our path and improve our long-term outcome. Put differently, we are so goal-oriented and focused on a final product that we may miss a lot of great opportunities and experiences along the way by not keeping our eyes open to what’s in our periphery. Don’t forget to smell the roses!

This is why entrepreneurs often stress the need for multiple “iterations” for any idea. Test often in the short term, learn, adjust your strategy and build on it as you go. To prescribers of this approach, there is no “wasted” opportunity. You will learn something from each experience, and by testing often you will adapt quickly. Of course, our definition of short-term as dental professionals will vary from freelancing entrepreneurs, but the concept and process should be similar.

Going back to my prior example with my work schedule, the same process can be seen in action. I started my schedule change with one office, cut back a day as my test, confirmed/denied its effectiveness, and then did the same with another practice, each time making adjustments and moving forward. The opportunity cost was minimal. If I found the approach wasn’t working, I could easily add the day back. I didn’t go for the big change up front, but rather in gradual iterations, so my risk was also minimized. Food for thought.

Another insight the Epstein found worth mentioning is our own natural bias in decision making. He explained how compared to someone in the exact same hypothetical situation as us, we believe we will have a better outcome. This is not because we are arrogant, but rather because we have familiarity with our own situations.

For example, you may know three other colleagues trying to build



a dental office from scratch, but because of the familiarity of the details in your case, you will believe your office build-out will be completed quicker, at a lower cost, and look better overall. We simply have a natural bias and give ourselves too much credit! This could lend itself to arguing for more experiences at smaller increments. It may be too late to reverse course with the first option if you realize things aren’t going to plan.

So what is the best way to go? Should we work solely in reverse, or go with the flow? Like everything else in life, I tend to see things in shades of grey. Having the end goal in mind from the beginning is paramount. It gives us direction, purpose and a fixed reference point. However, being overly fixated on that singular path without being open to straying off course, ideally in short bursts, will also result in missing out on valuable experiences and opportunities which will surely help shape your thinking. After all, entrepreneurs are characterized as risk takers and dreamers who set a final goal and work towards it from every possible angle. So take the best from both worlds and make it your own!

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