



Mary H. Osborne, Resources

PRACTICE RENEWAL

A Leadership Guide for Dentists

A Culture of Learning

Do you think of your practice as having a culture? When I consult my dictionary for the word “culture” one definition it offers is,

The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or population.

It seems to me that a dental practice certainly has a culture. How would you describe the culture in your practice? How would you describe the “products of human work and thought characteristic of a community” that is your practice? How would your team describe it? Your patients?

How would your practice be different if you had a true *culture of learning*? If each day was seen as ripe with possibilities for enrichment? If the people who worked there and those who came to you for care felt compelled and excited to learn? If there was an ethic of curiosity and a liveliness about your communication? If you were able to create a culture attractive to people who are most open to growth and learning, how would your days be different?

Keep in mind that another way to define *culture* has to do with biology, and in-

volves a medium in which particular organisms grow. Your practice can be that kind of a medium for learning.

Alignment

In *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge, he writes about learning organizations. Senge and his colleagues observed a quality in highly functioning teams that they called *alignment*. Alignment goes beyond shared vision or good communication, although it includes both. Alignment has more to do with a sense of flow, a way of working together that transcends language. It describes a group of individuals working *as one*.

Team learning is the essential process by which alignment occurs. Senge makes a distinction between a group of individuals who learn and team learning. There is nothing wrong with individual learning, but the distinction between the two is important. There are times when the dentist or other members of the team will participate in continuing education courses appropriate to their area of expertise and level of learning. That is entirely appropriate, but is not the same as team learning.

Even if the entire team participates in continuing education programs, there is no guarantee that team learning occurs be-

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cause team learning is more than continuing education. *The most effective team learning is an ongoing process of learning with and from each other.*

What Is Learning?

One of the most challenging aspects of developing a true learning culture has to do with moving beyond what our educational system has taught us about **how** learning occurs. Most of our experiences in “education” have to do with learning from a teacher. We see ourselves at any given time as either teacher or student. But there is another possibility: we can be teaching and learning at the same time. When we come to our work as learners every person, and every experience has the potential to teach us.

Another challenge to becoming a true learning culture has to do with our perception of **what** constitutes learning. We have been trained to equate information with learning, although they are not at all the same. The psychologist Carl Rogers wrote about “significant learning” which is more than the accumulation of facts:

It is learning which makes a difference — in the individual’s behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes and his personality. It is a pervasive learning which is not just an accretion of knowledge, but

which interpenetrates every other portion of his existence.

Two Ways To Learn

How can you create the *significant learning* that Rogers describes? There are two very specific ways of learning that you can incorporate intentionally into your practice. One is content and the other is process.

- ♦ **Content:** Content has to do with *information*. It is the type of learning with which we are most familiar from most of our educational experience. When we hear a lecturer or read printed material, we are in the realm of content. When we report on an experience with a given patient, the facts and our feelings about that experience constitute the content. When we talk about a change in one of our systems, the details of how the system is currently structured, the reasons to change it, and the plan for a new system, we’re sharing content. When we share new information we have learned, we share content. It is easy to see the importance of content in learning.
- ♦ **Process:** There is another way we learn that is also familiar, and that is through process. If content has to do with *information*, **process has to do with integration**. Process is the way in which we integrate information, and it could be said that there are two types of process: experiential and conceptual.

Mary H. Osborne’s *Practice Renewal* is published by Mary H. Osborne, *Resources*. This leadership guide is designed to challenge, inspire, and support dentists and their teams.

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In dentistry we have a clear understanding of the value of *experiential process* when it comes to manual skills. We know that hearing in a lecture or reading in a book about how to prep a tooth, plane a root, or pour up a model is not a complete way of learning. We know that integrating that information requires a hands on process.

When we have hands on experience, we learn more about how the information we have heard applies to us, how it works in our hands with our skills and knowledge. We don't expect to finish the learning the first time we do it. We understand that learning the new technique will take time, and that we will understand it differently the first time we work with it, than we will after working with it a number of times.

What is interesting to me is that it seems as though we have a hard time applying that knowledge to an understanding of how we learn concepts or *conceptual process*. Process is just as important in conceptual learning as it is in manual learning. The way we learn concepts is by working with them, by manipulating them, by filtering them through our own knowledge base and life experience.

I had to laugh at myself as I re-read parts of *The Fifth Discipline* in preparing for this newsletter. My first reaction is that Peter Senge has gotten smarter since the last time I read the book. I am inclined to think that the book has changed, but of course, I know I am the one who has changed. Through my mental process over the last several years, I now understand the concepts in a different way than I did when I first learned them. This is what I think of as "Layered Learning." My understanding is deepened over time and through my life experiences.

What Process Is Not

Process is so important to team learning, and so hard to define and describe. It's hard to

say exactly what it is, but there are some things it is not.

It is not **thinking**, although it includes thinking. Thinking has to do with sorting things out. One of its goals is to exclude elements which don't seem to fit, to narrow the focus.

It is not **talking**, although it may include talking. Group process almost certainly involves talking. But talking can go on and on and go nowhere. In some situations it can even intrude on the process.

It is not **time**, although time is necessary. Process does not involve a passive "wait and see" attitude. It is far more active than that.

What Process Is

- ♦ Walking around an idea — seeing it from different perspectives.
- ♦ Dancing with an idea — seeing how it moves and flows.
- ♦ Wrestling with an idea — struggling, raging, coming up against it.
- ♦ Trying on an idea — seeing how it fits.
- ♦ Making space for an idea — creating a container in which it can grow
- ♦ Playing with an idea — allowing it to amuse you, entertain you.

Group Process

Team learning also requires process. It is not reasonable to expect everyone in an organization to integrate concepts in the same way, even if they all hear them at the same time. Each person will filter the information or ideas through his own value system, knowledge base, and life experiences.

In a true learning culture there must also be an opportunity for group process. *When teams have the opportunity to talk about the meaning of*

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information, they are more likely to integrate it into their behavior. Carl Rogers identifies a “need to solve a problem” as one of the things essential to significant learning. Until each person can identify that need, the personal relevance for new information, there is not likely to be much learning.

Personal relevance can only come from within a person, not from an outside source. When you read a book or listen to a tape or hear a speaker, asking yourselves to identify specific examples of how it fits situations in your practice helps you find personal relevance.

A problem with group process is that it is sometimes difficult for us to see the learning in it. We are so conditioned to focusing on content that group process sometimes seems like a rehashing of old information. We may lose patience, feel like it is not a good use of our time. If I already think I have a clear understanding of something, I may become frustrated with someone else’s struggle. I may try to shut down the process and ignore the discrepancies. It may be hard for me to recognize someone else’s learning process.

Recognizing Process

If you can learn to recognize process, you may be better able to support it. The way individuals process can take on different forms. It may look like one of the following:

- ♦ **Resistance:** When someone is trying to integrate a concept into her thought process, she may appear resistant to the idea. The resistance can show up verbally in the form of discussion. Usually the harder you push, the more entrenched her resistance becomes.
- ♦ **Telling a Story:** Telling a story, even repeatedly, is an important form of process. Often as we tell the story, we hear the learning in it for the first time. If you hear someone telling a story you have heard them tell before, it may mean there is more learning in

it for him, and for you. *Listening very carefully to the story may give you clues as to where the meaning is in that story for the story teller. The more you honor the story the more opportunity there is for learning.*

- ♦ **Internalize:** Some people will choose to internalize their process even while in a group. In order for them to process information they may tune out the conversation and go inside with their own thoughts. While it may appear they are not engaged in learning they can be in a very active process. Checking in with them may offer important insights for the group. Or it may just let you know they need more time to think.

These are just some of the ways in which an individual’s process may show up in a group. You can probably think of others you have experienced. *The important thing to realize is that an individual’s process is a part of team learning, and team learning is more than the sum of it’s parts. It is a cooperative effort. At its best it is a true co-discovery process.*

I am not suggesting that you devote endless hours to processing information in a group. It is just as important to recognize when you have consensus as when you do not. There is no trick to knowing when to move on because learning is a process. If you move on prematurely, you will get another opportunity to deal with the issue.

Supporting a Learning Culture

There are certain elements that we know contribute to a learning culture. Ask yourself how present they are in your practice.

- ♦ **Curiosity:** Curiosity contributes to liveliness in an organization. It comes out of a genuine understanding that you do not know everything there is to know about any given situation. While that seems obvious, we all fall into the trap of believing there is nothing new we can learn from this person or about

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this situation. It's easy to convince ourselves that we have looked at the problem from every possible perspective. When we do that, we become a teacher only and take ourselves out of the learning process. It is more difficult for team learning to occur when someone on the team is not involved in learning, especially if that someone is the dentist. ***When was the last time you learned something new from someone on your team?***

I recall a conversation I had many years ago with a dentist for whom I worked as a hygienist. I asked him a question after one of my patients left about why he had recommended a certain course of treatment. I was not challenging his recommendation, just looking for the language to use in supporting it in the future. Before he answered my question, he asked me if I had a different idea for how we could serve that patient.

His question sent a powerful message to me. It was clear that he was genuinely curious and open to learning . . . *from me!* He was happy to share his rationale for the treatment recommendation, but he did not feel a need to defend it. He was open to other possibilities. ***Another effect that conversation had on me was that I realized that in that practice, I was not only allowed to have opinions of my own, I was expected to.*** It caused me to hold myself accountable to a higher professional standard of learning.

- ♦ ***Trust:*** Trust is one of the essential elements of a culture of learning. True learning requires a willingness to make yourself vulnerable, and you can only do that in an atmosphere of trust. ***You must trust that the others on your team want you to grow and will support your learning, not use it as a weapon to embarrass you or limit you in any way.*** For example, if I were a part of your team, I would want to know that if I admit to a lack of confidence in a certain area, you will not lose confidence in me.

Trust includes not only trusting each other, but also trusting the process. It asks that we

let go of our attachment to a certain outcome. For many of us our desire to make something happen can get in the way of our ability to trust the process. We lose sight of the fact that the combined intelligence of the group really is greater than any one perspective.

Unfortunately, the only way I know to develop that trust is *to trust*. Over and over again in facilitating team meetings, just as I find myself thinking I have to intrude on the process, the group makes a quantum leap forward without my intervention. As I experience the power of group process, I trust it more and more.

- ♦ ***Time:*** Developing a culture of learning takes time. Just as developing manual skills takes time, so does developing concepts. This is probably one of the biggest barriers to healthy process in a dental practice. Process does not appear to be very efficient. Disseminating information seems efficient. ***But the truth is that appearances can be deceiving.*** If you have ever had the experience of asking the team to do something that seems like a simple request but never happens, you may be seeing a need for more process. What we often do instead is tell them again, or give them more information, or wait a little longer — all of which take time.

Part of understanding process involves appropriate use of time. For example, valuable time set aside for team meetings in dental practices is often used for disseminating information which doesn't require any conversation and could easily be done in other ways.

Another time consideration has to do with when meetings are scheduled. If they are scheduled at the end of the day rather than in the middle of it, the group can decide to go longer if it's appropriate. Checking-in as you go along as to how the group feels about the way you are using your time is also important. It asks everyone to take responsibility for using your time well. ***Asking, "Shall we stay on this topic today, or move on and***

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come back to it?” opens up possibilities. Appropriate use of time may also include allowing for time between conversations on a topic for individuals to process internally.

- ♦ **Focus:** A learning culture requires focus. You must know how you want to serve. From that focus comes the values that shape your learning. *I’m not talking about narrowing your focus, but rather expanding it to include all that is possible to learn within the context of what is important to you and your team.* I often say to practices with whom I work that if they are unable to apply our work beyond dentistry, this learning will probably not be for them. The learning should inform their lives outside the office, not be in conflict with it.

How To Develop a Learning Culture

In addition to the elements we’ve identified, there are specific steps you can take to create a culture of learning in your practice. They are not “five easy steps,” but keep in mind that you are not trying to implement a tactic or a strategy, you are building a culture.

Become a Learning Person

As with most significant change in your practice, creating a learning culture begins with yourself. You must become a learning person. Jim Collins, author of *Built To Last*, writes that if asked to give an economic reason for learning, a learning person would find that question as odd as if they had been asked to give an economic justification for breathing. They learn because it is part of their reason for living. They have learning goals. Their “to learn” list is as important as their “to do” list.

What is on your “to learn” list? How broad are your learning goals? How committed are you to them? If the leader of an organization is not a

learning person, a learning culture is not likely to develop.

Becoming a learning person also involves seeing every situation with learning in mind — learning about your patients, your team, and your work, learning about your family, your friends, and your community. Perhaps most important is that through all your learning, you continuously learn about yourself. When asked what we learned from a particular event, our response is often “I learned that *some people* . . .” What we learned about “some people” is not nearly as useful as what we learn about ourselves.

What did you learn about yourself through that situation? What have you learned today?

Hire Learning People

If you want to make it easier to develop a culture of learning, hire people who make learning a priority in their lives. If you choose to make that a condition of employment in your practice, your practice will be profoundly changed. Trying to help people learn who are not natural learners can be very frustrating. Ask potential employees questions about learning in your interview process:

- ♦ How important is learning to them?
- ♦ How do they learn?
- ♦ What have they done in the last year that involves learning? What else?
- ♦ Ask for a specific example of something they learned recently.
- ♦ Ask them to talk about areas of growth they see for themselves in the future. What do they want to learn next? What else?

Learn About Learning

Become an expert on learning. Learn everything you can about how learning occurs, for yourself and those around you. Develop the ability to tap into all the ways in which people can learn. We all process information differently. The more you include all the ways people learn into your processes, the more team learning will oc-

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cur. Some of the ways we know people process include the following:

- ♦ **Writing:** Writing is vastly underestimated and undervalued as a learning tool. Maybe it's because our educational system uses writing mostly as evidence of learning, rather than as part of the process. But putting your thoughts on paper is a wonderful way to gain insights into issues.

When I consult with practices, I always give everyone on the team the opportunity to put their thoughts in writing to me prior to my visit. I send worksheets with a few open-ended questions about each person's perceptions about the practice and his or her role in it. I can't say they always welcome this opportunity. I hear a fair amount of grumbling about "homework." But someone (often the loudest grumbler) will invariably comment on how valuable the experience was for them. They say that they saw things differently as a result of their writing. ***Writing really is a unique learning process. It is an introverted process and it accesses different parts of our personality than talking does. That's why it offers new insights.***

Another reason to incorporate writing into your team learning is that some people express themselves better on paper than they do verbally. There can be a clarity of communication that is only possible when there has been time to put the thoughts together in a certain way. So often I see members of a team respond with new understanding when someone they thought they knew well reads what he or she wrote. A new voice emerges.

I have heard teams tell the dentist they had no idea he or she felt a certain way, and watched as the dentist shakes his or her head and says, "I thought I had said that a number of times." And that may be the case, but apparently, it had never been said before *in that way*.

One of the reasons I developed the Meeting Guide that goes with *Practice Renewal* is that I want to tap into that level of learning.

Coming to a team meeting with responses to questions *written out* changes the nature of the interaction. Even those who say they express themselves better verbally than in writing benefit from the process. The combination of writing, and then talking about what you wrote is powerful. If you have never experienced what I am describing, I encourage you to try it just once. I believe you will appreciate the difference you experience.

- ♦ **Dialogue and Discussion:** In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge makes a clear distinction between *dialogue* and *discussion*. "Discussion" has the same root as "percussion" and "concussion." The object of the conversation is to win, to have your views accepted. There are certainly times when discussion is appropriate, but we should be careful not to confuse that with dialogue, which is a very different learning process.

In a dialogue the participants suspend their assumptions in order to consider other possibilities. When I think of a chemical *suspension*, it occurs to me that it is not dissolved or even diluted. We continue to be able to see it in its own form. Our opinions, ideas, and assumptions can be talked about in suspension and will still be there for us when we finish, if we still want them. ***Suspending assumptions allows us to observe our own thinking.***

Some teams engage in discussion, but true dialogue is pretty rare. Both dialogue and discussion have value because they tap into different resources. Discussion has more to do with analysis, and dialogue has more to do with meaning. Both are important. The goal of a discussion is to make decisions, the goal of a dialogue is to explore complex issues. When you understand the difference you are better able to make a conscious choice to use one or both of them appropriately.

- ♦ **Facts and Feelings:** Too often there is a tendency to believe that one or the other has greater meaning. Learning comes from both. The facts of a situation are vitally important.

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I have often seen learning on a team break down. For example, when someone shifts from describing behavior that is a problem to ascribing motive for the behavior. Some examples:

"You don't care about anything except getting out on time."

"He doesn't really believe in team; he just wants to control everything."

There is little learning that will come from those conversations. It is not possible for one person to know another's motive and blaming her for motives you are only speculating about does not promote learning. The behavior is a fact, the way you feel about the behavior is an indisputable fact; ascribing motive is always pure speculation. Staying with the facts and describing behavior that doesn't work is far more effective. For example:

"When you leave for the day and we still have instruments to scrub and a patient in the chair, I get angry."

"I don't like it when you change the schedule without talking with us about it. We agreed on how it was to be scheduled, and I would like to be a part of making changes to it."

On the other hand, it is just as easy to dismiss the importance of feelings in the learning process. There is always something to learn from your own feelings, and sometimes from the feelings of others as well. For example, defensiveness is a feeling that can easily come up in team learning. There is an inclination to believe that it has no place there, but I see it as a learning tool.

We feel defensive — the need to defend — when we do not feel safe. If I am the person feeling defensive, there is learning in that. What is it that I am hearing that causes me to feel threatened? Instead of blaming myself for my defensiveness (or feeling defensive about my defensiveness), if I can

acknowledge it, I can begin to learn from it. Our emotional reactions are ripe with opportunities to learn about ourselves in relationship with others.

If I see evidence of defensiveness in someone else I can also learn from that. I can begin by asking myself what I might be doing that could cause that person to feel threatened. I can also point out the behavior I am noticing and ask about the emotion behind it:

"I notice that your body seems tense and your voice had some strong emotion in it, and I'm wondering what you're feeling right now."

If I listen very carefully to the response, I'll probably learn something about myself and about the other person. If she feels heard and understood by me, then we will learn together.

- ♦ **"Both/And" Thinking:** In a learning culture you can't get bogged down in too much either/or thinking. Rigid dualistic thinking has a tendency to shut down learning because it sees only two possibilities. It focuses on right or wrong, good or bad, yes or no. "If it's not this, it must be that."

Dualistic thinking doesn't allow for the possibility that it may be **both**, and something more than that. James Collins refers to "the tyranny of the OR" in his book *Built To Last*. On the other hand, "the genius of the AND" opens our thinking to a new perspective. It allows us to hold the paradox of two perspectives and learn from that.

Often the issues we're dealing with are evidence of a values conflict. They may focus on time or money, purpose or profit, consistency or flexibility, long-term or short-term goals. ***We can easily get stuck in thinking we can't have both, but values conflicts are the places where real learning can thrive.***

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In team learning both/and thinking encourages dialogue and creativity. If I can hold my belief and the possibility that what seems like the opposite could also be true, I will be more open to new ideas.

Both/and thinking doesn't have to do with compromise, which often means the dilution of an idea. It has to do with thinking in terms of more than, not less than. Learn to pay attention to "the tyranny of the OR" in your conversations. *When you find yourself stuck in trying to choose between two apparently opposing views, try asking the question: "What if it's both/and?"*

I've described some of the ways that people can process, but I don't want to imply that creating a culture of learning is a series of discreet processes. It's far more than that.

Look for the Learning

One of the most important aspects of creating a learning culture involves raising your awareness of learning. Very often we are not able to see the learning that is taking place. I often hear teams say that they talk about a lot of things at their team meetings, but they don't really get anything done. That may be true. But very often there is learning that has moved the group forward, even if no concrete decision or plan has been made.

Two characteristics of team learning that Peter Senge describes are the need to think insightfully about complex issues, and the need for innovative, coordinated action. Team learning then has to do with how the group thinks, and it also has to do with how a group acts.

In Joseph Jaworski's book, *Synchronicity*, he asks us to look at taking action from a different perspective. He tells us that dialogue encourages people to "participate in a pool of shared meaning." The word "dialogue" comes from the Greek words *dia* and *logos*, suggesting "meaning flow-

ing through." It does not *require* that people agree to take action. Instead, *the alignment that comes through team learning allows people to take coordinated action without necessarily agreeing to act.*

There are times when team meetings will end in a decision or a plan and times when they won't. If your team is sharing insights, ideas, material, information, feelings, and values in a safe environment, the chances are good that learning is going on and you will benefit from it. A useful question to ask yourselves at the conclusion of a team meeting is, "What was the learning?" What you do, what you decide, what you plan, has value, and so does what you learn.

I see many highly functioning teams where action occurs as a result of their shared learning. The greater the alignment, the less they are dependent on an action plan. At some point a shift occurs and there is more of a flow to their work together. They have more days when the schedule works well. In most cases it goes beyond their interaction with each other, and includes their patients as well. They attract more of the kind of people they enjoy working with, and have more of the conversations they enjoy having with them. They are confident but not closed. They do more and more of the dentistry they most enjoy doing, and they are still learning.

They find that all of this happens with comparatively little effort on their part, and they often wonder why. They sometimes think they are just getting lucky, or that the economy is making them more successful. They may think it's the new person they hired, or another change they have implemented recently. They may try to decide which of those things caused the shift they are noticing. My experience is that it is most often both/and thinking.

They are working in a culture of learning.



Classic & Current Resources

My work is influenced and informed by the wisdom of past as well as emerging new thinking. The following is a list of some of the sources I referred to while writing this issue of *Practice Renewal*:

American Heritage Dictionary

Built To Last

by James Collins & Jerry Porras

"The Learning Person," Training Magazine,
March, 1999

by James Collins

Synchronicity

by Joseph Jaworski

On Becoming a Person

by Carl Rogers

The Fifth Discipline

by Peter Senge



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1. Review your thoughts or notes about two recent team meetings. Ask yourself how much about each meeting focused on content and how much on process. Discuss examples of when process served you well and when you feel as though you processed too much.
2. Think of your most recent team meeting and ask yourself what was the dominant mode of interaction. Was it discussion or dialogue?
3. Review each of the ways people learn (i.e. writing, dialogue, discussion, etc.) and ask yourself which ones do you find most helpful. Which ones do you use most in your team meetings? Which ones do you think you might include more of in your meetings?
4. Think of an issue you recently worked on in your practice and ask yourself what were the either/or's in the discussion. Try to imagine a both/and way of looking at the issue. How does it change your perspective?
5. Think of an example of a topic you have talked about at one or more team meetings but on which you did not reach a conclusion. Whether or not you decided to take action, how has the dialogue influenced your work?