The Challenge of the Visionary

"The challenge of the visionary is being able to see things others cannot." I first heard that statement several years ago at a seminar with cultural anthropologist, Angeles Arrien. At the time, it seemed almost redundant to me. Of course visionaries see things others cannot; that's what makes them visionaries. But the more I thought about it, the more I came to understand the simple, but profound truth in those words: The *challenge* of the visionary is that you are able to see things others cannot.

When we see something very clearly, it is difficult to understand that others do not see it. We may be inclined to think: *They ought to see it. They could see it if they wanted to. They should just look harder.* Can you recall when you have had an experience in which you could see a fish jumping in the water, a deer in the woods, or a particular constellation on a starry night, and the person you are with does not see it? Or can you recall a time when someone else could see something that you could not, no matter how carefully they pointed it out? I recall frustration when I have experienced either side of that scenario.

The same is often true when what you see is a vision for how you want your patients to be cared for, how you want your work day to run or how you want your team to function. In my work with dental offices I see the challenge of the visionary in action. I see the frustration that comes when one person sees a vision so clearly he or she cannot help but move toward it, and others see it vaguely or not at all.

Often what occurs is what I call the "fatal flaw" of leadership: judging and resenting others because they can't see what you see. Instead of celebrating our own gift of vision, we blame others for their lack of vision. Instead of leading and guiding others, we judge them, badger them, or give up on them. Ultimately, we leave them in the dark.

You Cannot Do It Alone

It is theoretically possible for a dentist to run a dental office alone, but it is not practical. To achieve your vision you must help others see some of what you see. To accept the challenge of the visionary is to embrace your own gifts and talents, and to honor the gifts of

the people with whom you work. It requires a commitment to a developmental process of growth and learning for you and your team members. It is not a process that will come easily to some, but it can be learned.

Leadership is an attitude as much as it is a skill. It is a choice we make. You can choose to be frustrated with others for not seeing what you see, or you can step up to the challenge of discovering a way to help them see more clearly. You may always be able to see farther, because each time you get closer to the vision your perspective will change. Just when others think they "see" what you have been trying to get them to see, you may see a more evolved version of the vision. You can learn to celebrate that. It is your gift. It is your challenge.

Who Leads?

The dentist is not the only one in a dental practice who can lead; not the only one who can be a visionary. In fact, there may be key team members who are able to see beyond where the dentist can see. The challenge of the visionary is still a factor. Sometimes team members are even more prone to the "fatal flaw" of leaders; they may judge others on the team harshly for their inability to see the vision. They may not identify themselves as leaders. They may not see the role they can play in developing others, but for them too, leadership is a choice.

I recall very clearly when I was working as a hygienist in a practice many years ago and we had an assistant who was not performing well. I felt sorry for the dentist and other assistant who were struggling with this problem. After some time it occurred to me that, if I was not part of the solution, I was part of the problem. That realization was both empowering and intimidating to me. It was sometimes easier to judge others than to participate in solving the problem.

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary, "*to lead" is to "show the way by going in advance." Team members, as well as dentists, can choose to show the way. They can choose to lead by encouraging, understanding, challenging, supporting, and acknowledging others on the team. In the book, *Leader to Leader,* Dee Hock, founder and CEO of Visa, is quoted as saying that at least 20% of our time and energy should be dedicated to managing our peers, "those over whom we have no authority and who have no authority over us . . . Without their respect and confidence little or

nothing can be accomplished."

But often the most gifted employees, who are accepting and supportive in developing their patients, are resentful and impatient with their co-workers. They don't understand how they can play a role in helping others see their vision, and they become frustrated and angry. They can become isolated from the group and lose their effectiveness as a role model and a leader.

The distinction between leadership and authority is significant. ***Leadership is not conferred, it is earned, and anyone in an organization can earn the right to influence others.*** Vision is made tangible through action. Leadership is demonstrated in the day-to-day operations of an organization as well as in meetings and planning sessions. Only by applying what we know, can we expand the vision. If we choose, by default, to let others take the lead, we fail to meet the challenge.

Leadership goes beyond telling others what they should see, and even beyond demonstrating what is possible. Leadership requires us to understand those we want to lead. It involves *joining* with them to see the practice through their eyes, rather than staying separate from them. That challenge is not exclusive to the dentist in a practice; it is available to everyone on the team who wants to make a difference in the organization. Offering that challenge to talented individuals invites them to go to the next level of personal and professional development.

The Right People

The question which always comes up when we have been unable to help others see what we see has to do with whether the problem is with the leader or the follower. In Jim Collins' best selling book, *From Good to Great*, he reports that their research revealed the startling conclusion that what the companies who went from good to great had in common was "first who, then what." Before vision and before strategy, they focused on having the "right people on the bus, and the wrong people off the bus." This is contrary to conventional wisdom which holds that organizations must *first,* have a great leader with a great vision and *then,* get the people to buy into that vision.

I once heard it said that if we give any employees ninety-nine years to develop their gifts and talents, the chances are they can become great employees. That may be true, but no one is willing to wait ninety-nine years. What is an appropriate investment of time, energy, and money? How do we know if we have the right people on the bus? There are no easy answers to those questions, but there are guidelines you can track and markers you can monitor. There are two parts to this process: Hiring and Growing.

Hiring

The hiring process is the best place to begin. How do you make decisions about hiring? You can become more intentional and more systematic in your hiring. You can decide that certain qualities are conditions of employment in your practice. For example, if you want to have a learning organization make that a part of your hiring process. Listen for clear evidence that a candidate has pursued personal and professional growth. Ask what they have learned recently and how they learn. Don't limit the possibilities to continuing education opportunities. Listen for evidence of learning through books, church or community classes, natural curiosity. If you don't hear it, keep listening.

Character qualities are more important than

skills, which can be taught. Hire for initiative, openness, commitment, and a true desire to make a difference. If those qualities are present, and you listen carefully, you will hear them. If you don't hear these qualities, don't hire a candidate until you do.

Growing

It's never too late to make it explicit that your practice is a learning organization. Sit down with your team and have a conversation about the part that learning plays in your lives. Make it clear that you want everyone in your practice to look for opportunities to grow. Too often once we have hired candidates, we stop listening to them when they become new team members. We stop trying to understand the learning process and, instead, we just teach. Ask each person to think about areas in which he or she would like to grow, and how the practice can support his or her growth.

Schedule individual growth conferences to talk about their ideas. Don't expect each person to come up with a detailed learning plan. For some on the team who may not have been hired with learning as a condition, it may be the first time they have thought about growth and learning. Whatever small steps they can identify should be supported. Help them set appropriate goals and timelines. Remember that this is a developmental process.

Celebrate learning in your practice. Individually, and as a team, take the time to acknowledge new skills, ideas, and information. Pay attention to what kind of growth and what kind of support each person needs and wants. Tap into the resources you have within the team to help others learn; teaching others can be a powerful learning experience. Most important, learn to listen to how others see their growth and how it relates to their

role in the practice.

Balancing

In addition to focusing on how you hire and how you grow your team, it is important to pay attention to how individuals are contributing. What return is the practice getting on your investment in that person? There are two elements of return on investment that are important to track: operations and growth.

Some employees contribute steadily to the day-to-day *operations* of a practice. They can be relied upon to accomplish the tasks that are expected of them with competence and care. Their performance frees you from certain responsibilities that are important. They get things done. On the other hand, some employees contribute to the *growth* of your practice through imagination, vision, enthusiasm, and the ability to make things happen. Both contributions are important.

In determining whether or not you have the right people on the bus there must be a balance between what you are investing in them, and what you are getting in return. Some employees require a significant investment of your time and energy, and the return on investment is well worth the price you pay. Others may require little investment, but give more than enough in return.

Unfortunately, some team members take so much energy that they create a drag on the practice as a whole. In these instances, there is no balance between how they contribute—either operationally or in terms of growth—and the price the practice pays. Their contribution is simply not enough to justify the energy they drain from the practice.

Letting Go

Recognizing that someone is not the right person to be on the bus is one of the most difficult aspects of leadership. It may require that we *let go* of our connection to that person, of our investment in their success in the practice, of our insecurities as to whether or not we did everything we could. ***Letting go is the decision that is most often avoided, usually at the expense of the rest of the team.***

In an attempt to avoid the discomfort of the confrontation, many leaders ignore the problem. They hope it will go away; either literally or figuratively. They wait and hope the person will just leave. Sometimes they engage in passive/aggressive behavior designed to cause the employee to feel so uncomfortable they will quit.

Consciously or unconsciously, by failing to address the difficult issues, they diminish that person's dignity. An unintended consequence of that process is distrust throughout the team; and consequently, no one on the team feels safe.

There is no easy answer about when is the right time to let employees go, but one significant marker is your own belief in their potential for growth. ***Pay close attention when you find yourself giving up on that person, trying to work around him or her, or avoiding contact.***

When you notice that every new idea you have gets filtered through a sense of dread over how you will present it to that one person, that's diagnostic. Letting that person go is the kindest thing you can do for him or her, and it supports the integrity of your vision.

Dysfunctions of a Team

With the right people on the bus, and the wrong ones off the bus, your attention can be placed appropriately on the ongoing challenges of leading a team.

When I was a relatively new hygienist on a team, I recall hearing Avrom King say that it takes about five years to build a team. I remember thinking that was probably true for many teams, but that was not true for us. I came to the practice with a strong commitment to the values already in place. We worked well together as a group. Our patients trusted us to provide exceptional care and service, and we were up to the task. What I did not realize at the time, was that was just the beginning.

Working together as a team is an ongoing process of personal growth and development. It is never complete, but it does take years before we really understand what it means to share responsibility for a vision.

Patrick Lencioni has written an insightful book titled, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, which illustrates the complexities of the process. I highly recommend the book for team discussion. Through a simple fable he helps us to see the elements necessary for success on a team, and how they are interrelated. The five dysfunctions are illustrated on a pyramid, one layer building upon the other.

♦ ***Absence of Trust.*** At the foundation of the pyramid is the first dysfunction, "*Absence of Trust*." This refers to mutual trust which allows for individuals to be vulnerable in the team. In an absence of trust there is no room for mistakes from which we can learn. An absence of trust can lead to justification, blame, and defensiveness. To develop the trust that is essential to effective teamwork, teams

must overcome the need for invulnerability.

♦ ***Fear of Conflict.*** A need for invulnerability leads to a "*Fear of Conflict*," the next level of the pyramid. Since conflict of ideas is a creative force in a healthy organization, this dysfunction limits a team's ability to speak clearly and openly to the issues at hand. Instead of constructive debate, the group works to preserve a sense of artificial harmony. The harmony is artificial because typically there are underlying *tensions* which barely see the light of day, but no constructive *conflict* which can be addressed.

♦ ***Lack of Commitment.*** Fear of conflict leads to a "*Lack of Commitment*," the third dysfunction of a team. When individuals can debate and discuss options they are more likely to buy into the decision. Mature individuals don't have to get their way in order to support a decision, but they want to be heard. Without the opportunity to weigh in on decisions, what appears to be agreement is often ambiguity. There is no investment in the decision, and no commitment.

♦ ***Avoidance of Accountability.*** A lack of true commitment leads to the fourth dysfunction of a team, "*Avoidance of Accountability.*" If leadership within a team involves "managing our peers," there is an element of mutual accountability that is required. The gift of accountability is the very essence of team. However, it is virtually impossible to hold each other accountable to something to which we have not truly made a commitment. The result of avoiding accountability is that the standards of the organization are lowered.

♦ ***Inattention to Results.*** Ultimately, what

all the dysfunctions lead to is the final step of the pyramid, which is "*Inattention to Results*." Teams may monitor the numbers, and agonize over low production, but their attention is more focused on ego than on results. When a baseball player is more interested in his batting average than in a winning season, the results are predictable. The same is true in all organizations. When individuals become more invested in protecting their own turf than in genuinely exploring options, the team does not have the ability to ask the difficult questions and make the changes necessary for growth to occur.

I offer you these five "dysfunctions" to assess the health of your team at any given time. I don't believe it is useful to judge a team as either having a particular dysfunction, or of being "cured" of it. Rather, when you are not achieving the results you hope for, use each dysfunction as a diagnostic indicator.

Ask yourself how safe tour environment is; how willing everyone on the team is to be vulnerable, including the dentist. Reflect on your team meetings and how healthy the conflict level is. Ask yourself how committed each person really is to decisions that have been made, and how willing you are to hold each other accountable. Each point can be an indicator of an opportunity for growth in the organization.

Organizations That Thrive

We have talked about the dysfunctions of a team, but what contributes to vitality? It could even be said that all organizations at various times have dysfunctional elements, but some are more resistant to breakdown. What allows an organization to thrive in spite of staff turnover, economic downturns, ill-

ness, even breach of trust? Again, there is no easy answer, but there are indicators to which we can pay attention. The following are questions we can ask:

Is There a Clear and Compelling Vision?

We began with the challenge of the visionary and the ability to see what others cannot. But vision is as difficult to define as it is to describe. I think there is a perception that to have a vision is some mystical gift of sight that is all inclusive. When we talk about vision there is an inclination to think we must have a comprehensive plan, a complete picture of where we want to take an organization. My experience of vision is different from that.

A *clear* vision can be anything from a glimmer of an idea to a well thought out structure. It is more often evolutionary than revolutionary. While certain essential elements of a vision remain intact over time, the picture will continue to look different. Similar to looking through different lenses on a camera; the picture is essentially the same, but we see it in different ways.

In an organization, at least as important as the clarity of the vision is whether or not it has the power to move others.

That is the true challenge of the visionary; the ability to articulate a vision in a way that is compelling enough to motivate others to act.

It is not enough that they see what we see; what we see must be something they are willing to work toward. Part of your challenge is to understand what it is they see.

Am I Willing To Act Unconditionally?

To see the vision and articulate it is not enough. The vision has no power if the leader's commitment to the vision is dependent upon whether or not others agree with it or are able to act on it. It is easy to say that you believe in something, and easy to blame others for your lack of follow-through. To say, "I would do a complete exam on every patient, but my staff does not schedule enough time for me," is to say your vision is dependent on others.

Often what you tolerate is what you get. Unless you are willing to take a stand, to politely ask the person who scheduled inappropriately to rearrange the schedule, your vision is conditional. *Acting on your beliefs, even in the face of resistance, is the true mark of a leader.*

Team members other than the dentist can commit to acting unconditionally. Truly leading is "to show the way by going in advance." It is not enough to say, "I will be open and honest in my communication if everyone else will."

The challenge of leadership asks all team members to take personal responsibility for their own actions — to act with unconditional good will, unconditional commitment, and unconditional integrity.

Are We Working with the Right People?

Jim Collins' work discovered the importance of *first* having the right people on the bus because the values they likely share play an important part in determining how compelling the vision will be for them. My

vision grows out of what is important to me. If the people on the bus do not share any of my values, it would be difficult for my vision to inspire their commitment.

For example, if making a difference in the lives of my patients is part of my vision, and the people on the bus with me are only motivated by money, my vision would not be very compelling for them. On the other hand, if my vision is focused primarily on acquiring wealth for myself and my team, that vision may have power for them. Either vision can be compelling.

Of course, vision is generally more complex than either of the ones I have just described. ***Therefore, team members who have some depth of personal conviction, as well as the discipline to act on what they believe are most likely to be successful.*** External motivators alone rarely have the power to create and sustain a thriving organization. The challenge of the visionary is to explore and understand the personal and professional values of the people with whom they work*.*

Are There Challenging Standards and Expectations?

Teams that thrive are clear about what is expected of them; they know what it takes to be successful in the organization. In Jim Collins' research they found that the most successful businesses had systems and standards in place, and they managed the systems, not the people. ***Self-managing individuals want to have clear standards, not rigid rules.***

I believe the most important role of the leader in this process is to articulate the standards, but the standards do not necessarily emanate from the leader alone. With the right people

on board the standards evolve more organically. They grow out of experiences, changes in the environment, and even mistakes or disagreements. Margaret Wheatley, writes extensively on organizational change. In her essay titled, "Good Bye Command and Control," she reports,

> The world seeks organization, seeks its own effectiveness. And so do the people in organizations. As a living system self organizes, it develops a shared understanding of what's important, what's acceptable behavior, what actions are required and how these actions get done. . . . And as the system develops, new capacities emerge from living and working together.
>
> Can we recognize the self organizing behaviors of those in our organizations? Can we learn to support them and forgo our fear based approaches to leadership?

While there are certain clinical standards for which the dentist must take responsibility, other expectations about behavior on a team are best developed through self discipline and mutual accountability. I once heard it said that the term, "self discipline" comes from the concept of "being a *disciple* unto oneself." What a powerful way to set expectations.

If you have the right people on the bus, the standards must also be challenging. The gap between what we are able to do now, and what we aspire to should be narrow enough to be seen as possible, but wide enough to engage our attention. With that in mind, of course the standards will change over time. To allow this change to happen the standards cannot be rigid.

Knowing when to let go is part of setting clear

and challenging expectations. In my experience, if a practice has been in existence for some time and has never let anyone go, there are three possibilities: (1) they are extremely lucky, (2) they are uncompromising in their hiring process, or (3) they are less than clear about their standards.

If someone is unwilling or unable to help move the practice toward a shared vision, letting him or her go contributes to a safe environment for all. The leader must act on behalf of the team to uphold the integrity of the vision.

In organizations that thrive, leaders carry out this process with sensitivity and respect. They act decisively and compassionately. They don't drag things out after the decision has been made. They make their decision clear, and do what they can to support the person's leaving and moving on with dignity. They make a clean break, and they get agreement from the person being let go as to how it will be communicated to others. The process of letting employees go is perhaps the true mark of a leader.

Is There Active, Vibrant Participation?

In his book, *The Answer to How is Yes*, Peter Block says, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, "Remember that all patriarchs believe in participation, they just feel their particular people are not quite ready for it." It is the role of the leader to actively encourage participation. If you have the right people on board, and you are challenging yourselves to growth and development, then everyone's voice should be heard.

Just as it's important to recognize when your patients are actively engaged, (and when they are not) you must be realistic about the level of participation on your team. It's easy for leaders to convince themselves that if there is no active resistance to an idea, there is commitment, but it may not be true. There are certainly some things teams can agree on with little or no discussion. However, if that is the way most decisions in your practice are made, there may be cause for concern. I would wonder how actively you are seeking input that does not support your ideas.

Teams that thrive have the ability to talk about ideas on any number of levels. They reject the dualism of "either/or" discussions: "We can either do it this way, or that way." They feel free to ask: *What if? Why? How does that reflect our vision? Would this work as well?*

They don't think those questions will cause them to be seen as disloyal, contrary, or resistant to change. ***They are not afraid to say they feel nervous about an idea; or they are not confident of their ability to implement it; or they don't think it will serve the patients or the practice well.*** They know they will be listened to and their concerns taken seriously, even if others disagree.

Teams that thrive have weathered the storms of conflict. They have agreements in place about what they will do if things become too tense in a meeting. They can ask for time to step back, without going away. They have learned the value of working through sometimes painful issues, and they have experienced the deeper connection that comes from knowing the relationship can withstand conflict.

Individuals on teams that thrive are more invested in making sure the organization is paying attention to the right issues. They have ownership of the values, and are more invested in the success of the organization than in their own egos.

Inspiration

I am reminded of Martin Luther King's inspirational words in his "I Have A Dream" speech. Surely he felt the pain of a world that was unable to see what he saw. He did not berate us for our lack of vision or lecture us on how to behave. He simply painted a picture that was so detailed, so clear, and so compelling that even today most of us could not help but be inspired by it.

Not many of us have Dr. King's eloquence. I raise the question of *the challenge of the visionary* for you, not to ask you to evaluate or compare your performance or that of your team.

I want to help you delight in your vision. I want to help you remember that significant learning, for you and your team, is a developmental, long-term process. I encourage you to place yourself on a continuum that will help you see how far you have come, and identify opportunities for growth for you and your team.

I want to help you to find energy and enthusiasm in the process of identifying growth opportunities, not disappointment or frustration. I want to help you become intentional, disciplined, and joyful in your thoughts and actions. Instead of tearing out your hair asking why others can't see what you see, I hope you will learn to step back and say with a smile, "I see what others cannot see; that's the challenge of the visionary!"

PRACTICE RENEWAL

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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.

Angeles Arrien, Cultural Anthropologist, www.angelesarrien.com.

Peter Block, *The Answer to How is Yes.*

Jim Collins, *From Good to Great.*

Frances Hesselbein & Paul M. Cohen, *Leader to Leader.*

Avrom King, *"*Intentional Living," www.choosingtochoose.com.

Martin Luther King, *"I Have A Dream."*

Patrick Lencioni*, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.*

Margaret Wheatley*, "Good Bye Command and Control."*

The Challenge of the Visionary

1. Ask everyone on the team to describe In writing, their understanding of the vision for your practice. Share what you have written with each other. Listen carefully for similarities and differences. Ask clarifying questions about language and meaning.

2. How do you support others in the practice in implementing and enhancing the vision? How would you like other team members to support you?

3. How do you celebrate learning in your practice? How do you invite team members to share new skills and ideas?

4. Use the 5 dysfunctions of a team to evaluate your team's health:
   ♦ How willing are you to take risks, to make yourself vulnerable in your team?
   ♦ How do you raise differing views and discuss differences of opinions?
   ♦ How do you make certain that you have commitment from everyone on the team before moving forward?
   ♦ How do you hold each other accountable to follow through on decisions?
   ♦ How do you monitor the results of your plans?

5. How clear are you about the expectations and standards your practice has established for team members? What do you believe it takes to be successful in your practice?