



Mary H. Osborne, Resources

PRACTICE RENEWAL

A Leadership Guide for Dentists

Connections

In order to be a leader you must have the ability to connect with those you lead. One of my favorite definitions of leadership comes from Dr. Rich Green, who describes leadership as both “the willingness and ability to influence, first yourself and then others.” In a dental practice you have the opportunity to influence both your team and your patients, and both require you to make a connection.

When I consulted my dictionary for the word “connection,” one definition had to do with an electrical or telephone connection. That fits for me in the sense that I believe the kind of connection required in leadership is more like an exchange of energy than an exchange of information. In order to influence others we must move them in some way; we must generate a spark of some kind.

What do you do to create that spark, first for yourself, and then for others? How do you tap into your own vital connection? How do you give voice to what you believe is important in a way that allows you to influence others? How do you connect with your team? With your patients?

What Gives Meaning?

As always in developing leadership, we must begin with ourselves. The more deeply we are connected to our own values, the better able we will be to influence others. *There is a quiet confidence that comes across to others when we are clear in our own minds about what is important.* When we are able to quiet the noise of the outside world, and the chatter in our minds, we can hear our own voice more clearly.

The book titled *The Highest Goal* by Michael Ray comes out of the curriculum for the creativity course at Stanford University and has influenced many current well-known leaders in business. I tried a simple exercise outlined in the book which I found very interesting.

Ray suggests that you first recall the most meaningful thing you did in the last week or so. Take a moment to recall the experience fully, to see it in your mind’s eye to get the feeling for what made the activity so meaningful. Ray is not asking us to recall “some earthshaking event, just the thing that was most meaningful in the last week.” (You might want to try it right now.) Then answer the following ques-

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tions about the event:

- ♦ “How come this was so meaningful for me?”
- ♦ “Why is *that* (the reason you just gave for the previous question) so important?”
- ♦ And keep asking the question, “Why is that so important to me?” of every answer you give until you get down to one word. The word that you come up with represents “one quality of your essence, your Self.”

I did this exercise for the first time shortly after I finished an issue of PRACTICE RENEWAL, and that was the experience I identified as most meaningful for me that week. As I worked through the process of why it was meaningful, the word I came down to was “discovery.” I realized that, for me, writing is a process of watching the piece take form, of discovering where my somewhat random thoughts will take me. I also realized that discovery is a theme for me in many aspects of my work. I like the element of surprise, of newness, of learning — alone and with others. Discovery is one of the things I value.

Michael Ray suggests that when you discover your word you should,

Revel in it. Contemplate it. See how it has been a guiding quality in your life. Notice it coming up as you deal with each new situation.

Since doing the exercise, I have been noticing all the ways that discovery shows up for me and is

important in my work. I have always known that it played a part in my life, but I now know it in a different way. There is freshness to the concept which helps me tap into that quality of my work in a different way.

I have done the exercise several times now, alone and with groups, and each time there is a new word and new learning. I sometimes find it difficult to step back from the busy-ness of my life to allow a generous amount of time for contemplation, but this brief exercise has a certain simplicity, as well as depth. I see it as similar to a refreshing nap, when I cannot take the time for a long rest.

Whatever ways you find to help yourself touch base with your inner voice on a regular basis, I encourage you to honor those processes: walking, fishing, running, writing, or just sitting. Freeing yourself from what cultural anthropologist, Angeles Arrien calls the “monkey mind” is an essential aspect of effective leadership. ***Honoring the vital connection to your own inner voice allows you to connect more easily and more effectively with others.***

Connecting with Your Team

Connection is also important in leading your team; anyone on the team who wants to influence others in the practice can look for ways to make a positive connection. How often have

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Mary H. Osborne, Resources.
Phone: (206) 937-5851
E-mail: mary@maryosborne.com
Website: www.maryosborne.com
Address: 1564 Alki Avenue SW, Suite 303 • Seattle, WA 98116

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you wondered why the changes you have suggested in your practice seem to fall on deaf ears? You may think you have communicated very clearly about what it is you want, but influencing others toward significant change usually requires more than just information. There are a variety of ways to connect within your team: direction, delegation, support, modeling behavior, development, acknowledgement, empowerment.

- ♦ **Direction:** The traditional connection in a work setting has been *direction*. It is based on an agreement, explicit or implicit, that the person in authority gives direction and others do what they are told to do. This way of connection may involve fear or intimidation, but it may also be a benevolent type of authority. It is a connection which works particularly well with people who want or need a lot of supervision: people who are unable or unwilling to translate concepts into behavior. It provides the leader with a lot of control over how tasks are performed and requires him or her to manage those tasks.
- ♦ **Delegation:** Another way of connecting with those with whom you work is through *delegation*. It involves turning over a task or group of tasks for someone else to manage. You can delegate through authority or through mutual agreement when someone volunteers to take over duties in the office. It requires less attention from the leader to specific tasks, and less control over the manner in which the assignment is carried out. It involves a higher level of trust than direction, but the person who delegates still holds the responsibility for making sure the tasks get done appropriately.
- ♦ **Support:** While both direction and delegation represent a way of connecting with people which is strictly related to tasks, there are other ways of connecting which go beyond the strict limits of task. Connecting with someone on your team on the level of *support* is a more personal way of connecting. It demonstrates that you see the individual as a person with feelings which can and do affect

work. Whether the support is strictly personal or related to work, it can form a strong connection because it is a connection on more than one level, one which involves emotions as well as information.

The support may be related to difficult times someone is going through in his or her personal life. It may involve advice or encouragement, but it may also require nothing more than listening. ***Support does not imply solving the problem. In fact, in regard to personal issues, healthy support requires clarity about who owns the problem and the responsibility for resolution of the problem.***

Professional support entails understanding the emotional aspects of work. Learning a new skill or trying on new behavior requires courage, and emotional support in that process can mean a lot. I remember feeling very apprehensive when I first started to do treatment conferences with patients. I was afraid I would not be able to answer their questions, so the doctor set aside time in his schedule to join us toward the end of my time with them to support me and my learning. I often did not need the doctor's help, and you could say that time set aside in his schedule was "wasted," but I felt supported knowing that he was available if I did need help.

I remember another situation when I was having a difficult conversation with a patient. She was unhappy with our practice about something. It was towards the end of the day and I learned later that the doctor had been standing outside my door listening to our conversation. I asked him why he did not step in and rescue me. He said he would have come in if he thought I needed help, but that I was doing a great job of responding to her concerns. It was reassuring to me that he trusted me to handle the situation, but was not leaving me hanging out there on my own. Again, he was there if I needed him. I felt very supported.

I think of the best professional support as being similar to helping a child learn to ride a

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two wheel bicycle without training wheels. It is a process of holding the child up while he needs it, and gradually letting go while staying close by until he feels confident he has mastered the skill. It is a connection that everyone needs at one time or another.

- ◆ **Modeling Behavior:** You can connect with other people by *modeling behavior*. We all know that the best leaders lead through example. But sometimes I think we can set ourselves up for failure if we think that we must behave perfectly in order to be an effective leader. Rather than focusing on perfecting individual behaviors, you might ask yourself what attitudes and values you would like to see more of in your practice, and become a role model for those things.

- ◆ How do you demonstrate your work ethic?
- ◆ Your beliefs about teamwork?
- ◆ Your understanding?
- ◆ Your compassion?

Whatever you want more of from your team, ask yourself how you can model that.

- ◆ Do you want better participation in team meetings? Ask yourself how you model good listening and acceptance of others' ideas.
- ◆ Do you want your team to be open to learning and growing as a result of constructive feedback? Ask yourself how you respond when your behavior is challenged. If you become defensive when challenged, what is the attitude and behavior you are modeling?

You are a model in your practice. For better or worse, your behavior speaks louder than your words. You can increase the connection through role modeling by becoming more intentional with it. You can step up to the plate and tell people that you want to model the behavior and attitudes you want to see in the practice. You can ask your team members to feel free to ask questions if they are unclear about what you want from them based on your behaviors. It demonstrates

courage to make yourself vulnerable in that manner, but it is a powerful statement to the people with whom you work. It requires you to be willing to be less than perfect, and to be willing to learn from your mistakes.

- ◆ **Development:** Another way of connecting with your team is from a *developmental* perspective. When you see your role as a developer of talent in your practice, you see people clearly as to where they are; you fully accept them at that level; and you enter into an intentional, individualized, stepwise process of helping them grow.

The process is *intentional* in that you make it clear that growth is desirable in your practice and that you will invest time, energy, and other resources into that process. Intentional development is not a process you enter into unilaterally or surreptitiously. It requires agreement.

It is *individualized* in that it requires you to see each person as an individual with distinct gifts and talents and unique life circumstances. Comparison to others is counterproductive. The only useful comparison is in relation to that person's history, tracking how far they she's come.

It is a *stepwise* process in that it sets up growth and development as a clearly defined, incremental learning progression. It has clear agreements, expectations, and markers for tracking progress.

When you approach individuals on your team from a developmental perspective, you form a strong connection because you help them see possibilities they may not have seen for themselves. You invite them to future focus and see themselves in the future as more skilled and more accomplished than they are now. ***You don't just wait patiently for people to learn and grow; you actively participate in the process. You demonstrate commitment to their growth and development.***

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- ♦ **Acknowledgment:** Another way to connect with people in your practice is through **acknowledgment**. Everyone wants to be recognized for their achievements and/or their perspective. I am not referring here to empty praise, but to a genuine desire to identify accomplishment and express appreciation or admiration.

What I know is that if you look for evidence that people are contributing effectively you will find it; if you look for evidence that they are not, you will find that also. The old concept of “catching someone doing something right” has great value to that person as well as to the organization as a whole.

What I notice about myself is that there are days when I feel overwhelmed by all that I have to do. I can easily convince myself that I have to pay attention to everything, or nothing will get done. Other times I am acutely aware of all the things that other people do that make it possible for me to do what I do. I realize that the reason I don’t pay attention to all those things is that I don’t even have to think about them, that there are literally hundreds of things that get taken care of quite competently without any input from me.

When I don’t have time for reflection, I am more likely to feel all alone. When I step back, I can easily see how well supported I am by others. At those times I am genuinely moved by the commitment, consistency, and creativity of the people around me. I see the connection of what they do with what I do, and I feel connected to them. Taking the time to acknowledge the difference people make in an organization is a worthwhile investment of our time and our attention.

- ♦ **Empowerment:** I believe that the most significant way you can connect with your team is through **empowerment**. Empowerment may include many of the connections we have been talking about, but it goes beyond any of them. The empowerment connection is one in which you help people see possibilities they may not see for themselves. ***It often***

involves seeing potential in someone that she does not see herself, believing in her and challenging her assumptions about herself, either on a personal or professional level.

I remember two different dentists I worked for during my career as a hygienist who challenged my thinking about myself. One was a dentist I worked for when I was quite young who enjoyed playing tennis and asked me if I ever played. I replied that I was not a good athlete and that I could never play tennis because I had terrible eye/hand coordination. He laughed. When I asked what was so funny, he said he knew that was not true, because he had seen how I practiced hygiene and knew I had excellent eye/hand coordination. His comments challenged a deeply held belief of mine. After I moved away and left his practice I took tennis lessons and enjoyed playing for many years. His comments caused me to let go of the story I had been telling myself that I was inept when it came to athletics.

Another dentist with whom I worked empowered me professionally just by listening to me and taking my opinion seriously. I had seen a patient in hygiene and recommended that she see a periodontist. When the doctor did his exam he suggested we see her again in our office in three months.

After she left I asked the dentist why he suggested we see her again instead of referring her to the periodontist. He stopped short and asked if I had a different opinion on what we should have done. I immediately made it clear that I was not questioning his judgment but just wanted to better understand the office policy about referrals. He said he was not offended, and really wanted to know what I thought was best. He acknowledged that I was the person who had spent the most time with the patient and if I thought she should see a periodontist, he would call her and make that suggestion.

I had not worked in that practice very long at

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that time, and his response to my question sent a powerful message to me. I realized through his question that he saw me as a co-therapist who was fully entitled to an opinion, not just an employee who needed to be told what to do. It caused me to take more responsibility for my opinions and my questions. Again, it caused me to see myself differently.

Empowerment is often confused with delegation, but handing over a task to someone else is not empowerment. Empowerment may occur as a result of the confidence you demonstrate by the task you delegate. *But the empowerment has more to do with the way you see another person — the esteem in which you hold them — than the responsibility you assign. It is your ability to see possibilities for someone that they cannot see for themselves that creates the dynamic connection of empowerment.*

I have outlined here some of the ways to connect with team members, whether you are the dentist or someone else on the team. Some are more powerful than others, and some are more or less appropriate for different people in different circumstances. All have value. As you review these seven connections you might ask yourself which ones you use most often. Which ones do you combine for greater effectiveness? How can you incorporate more of the kinds of connections you want in your practice?

Connecting with Your Patients

Connecting with our patients is just as important as connecting with our team. In order to influence patients to make healthy choices for themselves, we must find a way to connect with them. People are better able to make difficult decisions when they feel safe, and they feel safe to the degree to which they feel connected to you. There are a variety of ways we can and do connect with our patients.

- ♦ **Authority:** The traditional way of connect-

ing with patients is on the basis of *authority*. It involves telling people what they need to do and expecting that they will do it because you have stature or information they do not have. This is a valid connection and works well with people who are unable or unwilling to make decisions for themselves. It is not unusual for elderly people who were raised at a time when a doctor's authority was unquestioned to feel comfortable with this connection. It is also sometimes the way we must connect with children. It is not the most effective way to connect with most adults.

- ♦ **Information:** It is also possible to connect with patients through *information*. There is a lot they do not understand about dentistry and dental health, and they depend on us to inform them. We have a wealth of information we can share and this tends to be a comfortable way for dental professionals to connect. We tend to feel safe in our knowledge; we may enjoy the sense of control it offers. It is also the way most patients are accustomed to relating with their dentist, so it may be comfortable for them as well. They may be grateful for the information and impressed with our knowledge.
- ♦ **Commonalities:** Another way to connect with patients is in terms of *commonalities*. This is the way most people initially connect in social situations. It comes from a belief that people enjoy people who are like them, so we look for things we have in common with others. We try to find interests, experiences, and likes and dislikes that we share. This connection goes beyond authority and information which keep the focus on dentistry; it is more of a personal connection. When we establish things we have in common, we move out of the strictly professional relationship and demonstrate that we care about the person on more than one level.

When we find things we have in common with someone else it tends to put both of us more at ease. We have something we both enjoy talking about that does not involve dentistry. More importantly, there is a perception that if we have similar experiences,

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on some level we know each other better. We tend to believe that we understand each other better which contributes to a sense of safety. This connection is very important to people who value relationships. It is also more important in certain communities and cultures than in others. People who do not place a high value on relationship, however, may be skeptical of an attempt to connect on this level.

- ◆ **Compassion:** You can connect with your patients on the level of **compassion**. This level of care involves an emotional connection. We understand our patients' lives are sometimes complex and difficult. When someone is in pain or fearful, we can identify with his experience and treat him gently, both physically and emotionally. When we have genuine compassion for people in a dental office, we understand that information alone will not allay their fears. We are acutely aware that pain is a matter of perspective, and only the person experiencing it can determine how much is too much. We understand that shame is emotionally painful and do everything we can to make sure our patients feel accepted as they are.

Compassion is easier with some people than with others. Patients who complain a lot can lose our compassion. A new patient in obvious pain usually wins our compassion. But sometimes it is harder to bring that compassion to the relationship when the person has been a part of the practice for awhile. It's easy to become complacent when we have cleaned someone's teeth a number of times, and she seems comfortable with us. Some people try to put up a brave front so as not to seem weak. We might forget that they had bad experiences when they were young which can still affect them every time they have restorative work to do.

It's not that we don't care; we can just lose our awareness. Dentistry can become somewhat routine for us, and we can forget that for some people, it will never be routine. We can become casual, even cavalier about it, making jokes when the patient is not finding

anything funny. *The more we keep our attention on the patient, the more likely we will pick up subtle signals that tell us how to care for him or her. The more we stay connected to our own compassion, the more we will be able to connect with our patients on that level. And it is a powerful connection to have in a dental practice with every patient every day.*

- ◆ **Values:** All of the connections we have talked about are appropriate in a dental office at various times with different individuals. Combining several of them enhances the bond we are creating. For example, connecting on the level of information can be helpful; and if you also find something you have in common with that person, the connection is stronger. When authority is an appropriate way to relate, it will be a stronger connection if you add compassion.

But there is one connection that is stronger than any of the others with both team and patients, and that is a connection on the level of values. *Understanding what is important to someone else is a powerful link. When people feel really understood on the level of their values, the relationship changes. The connection goes right to the core of who they are.*

When I work with groups I often suggest a listening exercise in which participants partner with someone and interview each other for about five minutes. After the interviews are complete I ask everyone to reflect on the conversation and make some notes about the values they think they heard. What did they hear from their partner as to what is important to him or her? Then I ask them to give each other feedback on what they heard, not what facts they learned, but what they think is important to the other person.

Every time I facilitate that exercise I notice that the decibel level in the room can get pretty high as people engage in the interview process. But there is a noticeable drop in the noise in the room when participants are asked to feed back to their partners what they

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heard about what is important to them. The lowering of the voices is evidence of a deepening of the connection.

What is interesting to me is that I don't tell the group in advance that they will be feeding back values to their partners. I suspect if I did they might struggle with that, think it was too difficult (much the way I felt about playing tennis). But they are able to hear and feedback values to their partners, and they are frequently amazed at how accurately their partners assess what is important to them. They report a sense of feeling heard and understood. They feel a strong connection to the person who interviewed them.

How would your practice be different if you were to take a few minutes after you see a new patient, or after you spend time with an existing patient, to reflect on the values you heard? Just ask yourself what you learned about what is important to that person. I am not talking about just identifying dental motivators or "hot buttons." Ask yourself in general what you hear as important to this person. Is family important? Faith? Quiet time? Friends? Learning? What did you hear? Make a note or two in the chart.

If it seems appropriate the next time you see that patient, feed back what you had heard from her.

"Based on our conversation last time you were here, Mrs. White, I got the sense that _____ is important to you."

Pay attention to her response. Notice her facial expression, her tone of voice,. ***Ask yourself if you feel a different connection with that patient. See if you don't find yourself connecting in a different way with a lot of your patients. The more you listen for values, the more you will hear.***

Connections are easier for some of us than they are for others. They are more important to some than to others. ***But keep in mind that connections are a two-way street. As***

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you focus on connecting with others, you will have the opportunity to experience a different connection from them. In our busy world of dentistry it is easy to lose sight of the impact we have on the lives of those we serve. ***If you are open to it, you can find new meaning in your work by allowing in the difference you make in people's lives. Give yourself permission to fully experience the appreciation your patients and your team feel for the difference you make in their lives.***

The Vital Connection

Years ago in an all too rare moment of stillness, I sat on my deck watching the parade of people who walk along the beach across from where we live. I saw a young man walking with a little boy who was probably about three years old, and who I guessed was his son. The father was walking quickly trying to hurry the child along, with little success. Eventually the father began to slow down and match the boy's pace, and then even came to a stop as the child investigated some fascinating leaf or piece of dirt on the sidewalk. After awhile the pair began to move along side-by-side at a similar pace as if they were connected by a tether.

As I watched the scene from above, I thought about the connection that was happening and how it related to a dental office. It occurred to me that we often walk out in front and wonder why our patients are not keeping up with us. We try to hurry them along. But if we slow down our pace, and even stop to investigate something *they* find interesting (even if it is not pathology we are going to treat), we find that we can begin to walk together at a mutually acceptable pace. The connection is strong.

I believe that the same thing is true in regard to listening to our own inner voice. The world wants us to hurry, but if we slow down and walk with that part of us that knows what is important, we can create a different pace for our lives. Who

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knows, we may even have some fascinating discoveries along the way.

Dr. Carl Jung said:

Your vision will become clear only
when you look into your heart.
Who looks outside, dreams.
Who looks within, awakens.

I cannot encourage you enough to allow time to look within, time for contemplation and integration. When you find yourself saying, "I can't hear myself think," make time to hear your own inner voice. Try not to use that time to figure things out, but allow some space for things to work themselves out. Allow time for awakening!

Connection to self is the most vital connection. It is the link that gives life to all the other relationships. It is the most important element in developing your ability to influence others. ***It is the spark that ignites your vision and your leadership.***

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, speaking engagement

Dr. Rich Green, speaking engagement

The Collected Works of Carl G. Jung

by Carl G. Jung

The Highest Goal

by Michael Ray



Mary H. Osborne, Resources

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Meeting Planner

Phone: (206) 937-5851 • Website: www.maryosborne.com

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1. Try the exercise from Michael Ray's book, *The Highest Goal*. See pages 1-2 of this newsletter for directions.
 - ♦ How does the word that resulted from the exercise play out in your work within the practice? Within other areas of your life?
2. In what ways are you actively connecting with your team members?
 - ♦ How do you support your team?
 - ♦ How do you role model behaviors you want your team to employ?
 - ♦ How do you actively encourage and support your team members' individual growth and development in your practice?
 - ♦ How well do you acknowledge and empower your team? How can you do better?
 - ♦ Which of the seven ways of connecting with your team do you combine for greater effectiveness?
 - ♦ How can you incorporate more of the kinds of connections you want in your practice?
3. How do you connect with your patients? (e.g. Authority, Information, Commonalities, Compassion, Values)? Which of these ways do you combine for greater effectiveness? Do some ways of connection work better with some people than others?
4. During the next week listen to 10 of your patients with the intent of learning what is important to them (i.e. their values), and record your discoveries in their charts. With those discoveries in mind, ask yourself if you feel a different connection with those patients now.
5. How do you see expanding the connection with your *self* in the work you do within the practice? And to other areas of your life? What are the barriers you see in expanding this "essence" through parts of your daily routine? Time, money, patience, understanding, focus, compassion? What steps can you take to help bring more of this essence into your daily life?