



# Leadership

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**ABSTRACT** Leadership opportunities are all around us as dental professionals. In fact, dentists may not realize the expectations that are placed on them as health care professionals to provide leadership. This article will address the various stages of a dentist's career giving examples of leadership opportunities and responsibilities that a dentist encounters, with ideas as to how these might be approached and managed.

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One may ask “Why an article on leadership?” or “Is there really something about leadership that I ought to know?” Webster's Dictionary describes a leader as a “guide, conductor, or one who directs.” Industry and business have acknowledged for decades the importance of leadership. Ken Blanchard (*Leading at a Higher Level*) and Jim Collins (*Good to Great*) are two of many authors who have studied and written about leadership in the workplace. Google “leadership” on the Internet and an abundance of links to books, institutes, and self-study resources pop up.

A central theme of the authors' discussion here is that leadership cannot be avoided by a dental professional. In fact, leadership finds the dentist when assuming the mantle of the profession. First, the dentist must direct the “dental team.” Dentists may have small

proprietary operations compared to large corporations and organizations. Regardless of size, however, a “team,” in order to be successful, must be led effectively like any other organization.<sup>1</sup>

Second, society expects and needs health professionals to lead beyond the confines of their practices. Finally, on a more basic level, family members see dentists as role models, mentors, and a source of health care knowledge.

## Getting Started

In the early years (first five years) of a dental career, the new dentist usually begins as an associate or employee dentist. Almost immediately, the young dentist is looked to for leadership. Dental auxiliaries look to the dentist with whom they work as the director of patient care. They expect the dentist to provide guidelines on the services to be provided, the schedule the office keeps, and training

and motivation of the office staff. Yes, the dentist manages these details but leadership is the key to effective management.

The dentist's primary concern, of course, is his or her patients. Beyond actually providing dental care to patients, more is expected of today's dentist by these patients. Patients look to their dentist for overall health advice and guidance. While the dentist will not be providing medical care beyond dental services, comprehensive dental care requires the assessment of a patient's medical history. It is the dentist's responsibility to educate patients on the value of medical supervision and the management of health issues that patients can discuss with the dentist or that the dentist discovers.

An effective leader inspires positive behavior in all those who look to him or her for guidance.

How is it, then, that a dentist becomes a leader? Studies have shown some leadership skills are acquired simply through dealing with people in a kind of "trial and error" set of experiences.<sup>2</sup> There are, obviously, ample opportunities for this type of learning in a dental practice. The first stage of a dentist's practice is the time to build and test his or her leadership skills. Being a leader involves a complex series of skills, such as being analytical, communicative, and self-reflective.<sup>3</sup>

Many individuals are fortunate to be natural leaders who settle easily into this role. For others, this is more difficult. Leadership skills, however, can be learned.<sup>4</sup> There are resources available to those who wish support in developing these skills.

### Learning to Be a Leader

Many dentists may have started early with leadership involvement in high school, college, or dental school being active in student body or club

activities. The tripartite dental association provides many opportunities for member dentists to learn leadership skills. Every one of the 32 local components in California offers venues for their members to strengthen leadership skills.

Many local dental societies provide formal leadership training for their interested members. This training not only is effective, it also provides a comfortable setting for members of the component to get to know one other and learn from each other's leadership styles.

## IT IS THE DENTIST'S responsibility to educate patients on the value of medical supervision and the management of health issues.

Leadership programs are offered by the CDA and ADA as well. The CDA offers a three-day leadership education conference featuring nationally and internationally known speakers. The conference allows new and established dentists to learn and fine-tune their leadership skills in an enjoyable and interactive environment. The ADA, working with Kellogg School of Management, has created leadership and management programs for dentists such as the "ADA Institute for Diversity in Leadership" and the "ADA/Kellogg Executive Management Program."<sup>5</sup>

### Getting Involved

As the dentist enters the second stage (next six to 10 years) of a dental career, he or she may now have purchased an existing or have opened a new practice.

Growing or promoting the practice can be a challenge. Some consultants may suggest fliers or free dental exams to attract new patients to the practice. Many successful dentists, however, recommend leadership and involvement in the local community such as joining a service club like Rotary International, giving dental awareness lectures to local elementary schools, or coaching a sports team. A dentist's community participation provides exposure to a potential patient base and allows the professional to serve the community as well.

Dentists interested in more community involvement have a resource in their dental association. A call the executive director of the local component can lead to a committee assignment or participation in a community project or event sponsored by the dental component.

### Applying Those Skills

In the middle years of practice (11 to 20 years) the dentist has most likely settled into a comfortable style of practice with many of the initial financial concerns about practice now managed. Effective leadership has likely contributed to the success now enjoyed during these middle years. The leader must set the "vision" for the practice; the leader must recruit and retain the right people; and then the leader and the team can create the path to success.<sup>6</sup> A dentist who leads effectively will have a more efficient office with more long-term stability and workplace satisfaction.

Mentoring is a form of leadership and dentists in the middle years of practice have much to offer in mentoring dentists and others. Some of the venues for mentoring include study clubs, new dentist forums with the local dental society, and career day presentations at local schools. New colleagues join the dental profes-

sion continuously — welcome them, take them to lunch, listen to their concerns, share your experiences, and offer your advice and wisdom. These new contacts you initiate could provide opportunities for referrals and promote good will reflecting positively on you and your practice.

Getting involved in dental education is still another opportunity for mentoring. Having practiced for 10 or more years, dentists have much knowledge to share. The years of private practice clinical experience are priceless — teach at the local dental school and share your knowledge and love for dentistry with the new generation. Teaching can enhance your reputation as a professional with your colleagues and patients.

### Leading to Make a Difference

The transition years (20 to 25-plus years of practice) have different significance depending on the individual. Some practitioners wish to continue practicing as usual. Some may choose to bring in an associate or partner to share the responsibility while others may choose to phase out altogether and enjoy their mature years with family and personal interests and hobbies. For many, this is a time when an individual struggles with legacy issues or thinks about giving back to the profession and society that has provided a comfortable life.

Dentists who have become more confident in their leadership skills may want to expand their leadership roles. The dentist at this stage who is no longer practicing full time, or only minimally, has more time. He or she may choose to work for the community and profession. A dentist with the time and energy to devote his leadership skills to local organizations is invaluable to the community. Local communities need leaders on school and library boards, hospital foundations,

and parks and recreation committees, just to mention a few. Local public health and charity organizations also appreciate the assistance of health professionals.

Professionals who desire to lead within their profession, if they are not already doing so, should consider the tripartite dental association as a source for leadership opportunities. The CDA leadership page of the CDA Web site is the place to start for the dentist desiring to provide leadership within the profession itself.<sup>7</sup>

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Those professionals who have an interest in political advocacy on a larger scale have examples of such leaders with a dentist now serving in each house of California's Legislature. Dr. Bill Emerson serves in the state assembly and Dr. Sam Anestad serves in the senate. The dental profession needs leaders who will represent the interest of the profession and our patients in the health care system of which dentistry is a part.

CDA has two affiliates that can help member dentists in their advocacy efforts. CalDPac supports political advocacy by assisting members in communicating with elected officials. The CDA Foundation was created in 2001 for those dentists who are interested in efforts to expand access to and delivery of oral care. A den-

tist desiring to provide leadership in this larger arena can do this anytime in his or her professional career.

### Conclusion

In whatever stage of his or her career the dentist may be, the potential for leadership is everywhere. Dentists are leaders by virtue of their profession. Throughout their practice life, they should embrace leadership and involvement in a variety of venues: practice, organized dentistry, clubs and organizations, community, and family. "The only way to make a difference is to get involved." These words were spoken often by Dr. Arthur A. Dugoni to his students at the University of the Pacific School of Dentistry. His words have long resonated and inspired leadership commitment in many Pacific graduates. Leadership skills and principles apply everywhere an individual lives and functions. Examples of leadership opportunities have been discussed. The effectiveness with which a dental professional approaches and manages leadership throughout the phases of a career can contribute to success of a practice, provide for occupational satisfaction, and enhance a dentist's quality of life. ■■■■

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