



Relationship Based Dentistry: The 21st Century Formula for Success

From Fixing Teeth to Helping People

By Mr. Peter Barry, CMC, RRDH

ABSTRACT

For most dentists practice management was not something they signed up for when applying to dental school. In fact, for many clinicians, especially first decade dentists; when they hear the word “Practice Management” it conjures up images of rah-rah, hoop-la, Kumbaya, fluffy duffy simplistic concepts and processes that fall well below the realm of their technical knowledge and clinical interests. Unfortunately this viewpoint can be somewhat self limiting because our ability to succeed as clinicians really lies outside the scope of our technical abilities (clinical skills and medical knowledge). In fact, there are many highly skilled clinicians who do not achieve the same level of success and effectiveness as their lesser-skilled colleagues.

RÉSUMÉ

Pour la plupart des dentistes, la gestion de la pratique n'est pas ce qu'ils envisageaient lorsqu'ils se sont inscrits en Médecine dentaire. En fait, pour plusieurs cliniciens, surtout au cours des dix premières années, lorsqu'ils entendent le mot « Gestion de la pratique » ils s'imaginent des images de concepts et procédés très simples qui se trouvent bien bas sur l'échelle de leurs connaissances techniques et de leurs intérêts cliniques. Malheureusement, ce point de vue peut être quelque peu limitatif en soi parce que notre capacité de réussite en tant que cliniciens dépasse le cadre de nos compétences techniques (aptitudes cliniques et connaissances médicales). En fait, il existe plusieurs cliniciens très compétents qui n'obtiennent pas autant de succès et qui ne sont pas aussi efficaces que leurs collègues moins compétents.

This reality was demonstrated in the 1970s when the Andrew Carnegie Foundation funded the largest research study ever done to determine what makes an individual successful. They surveyed

more than 300,000 people in four employment sectors, business, industry, education, and government. The findings speak for themselves! It was found that just 7% of your success is determined by

your technical knowledge and only 12% by the technical skills you possess. Interestingly, the other 81% of your success was determined by factors unrelated to your technical expertise: mainly your

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unique approach to life (attitude) and interpersonal skills.

Let's face it; years of university and dental training do little if anything to prepare you for one of your toughest challenges as a dentist (or specialist) "managing your practice while effectively promoting the full scope of your available services to your customers!" While we all know that taking care of patients and being a top-notch clinician is important, most dentists – no matter how brilliant in the clinic or the operating theatre – have little experience or knowledge when it comes to managing, their staff, their time, and the efficiency of their office. As a result, many dentists get bogged down in crammed schedules, staff morale and team unity issues, ineffective billing and collection practices, confusing operational systems, productivity challenges, and the often unbearable stress of having too much to do, no time to fix the problems, and no idea how to make things better or how to take things to the next level of success and fulfillment. To top it all off, this day-to-day business complexity begins to dilute our ability to be fully engaged and influential when it comes to marketing/communicating the value of our services to patients. That's where practice management and leadership skill development becomes important. Practice management should be seen as an empowering natural extension of the clinical excellence mandates dentists' pursue so vigorously throughout their careers. Practice Management (Clinical and Business Leadership) is in fact the soil

in which the seeds of success in dentistry are grown.

In the first of this three-part series on practice management we will explore the changing landscape of business and clinical dentistry. We live in a fast-paced, highly stressful, technology driven world that is becoming more and more impersonal all the time. Howard Schultz, founder of Starbucks Coffee believes this loss of human connection is creating a fundamental change in the way consumers buy products and services. Part 2 will take us into the world of case acceptance and communication skills. After all what good is all of our advanced knowledge and superior clinical skill-set if patients aren't asking us for all the wonderful things we are capable of delivering into their lives through the medium of dentistry. Sales used to feel like a bad word that most ethical clinicians wanted to practice above. The real question before us today is "how can we sell/communicate our services to people in a more buyer-based, service-focused, and solution-driven way without sounding like a pushy salesman. And finally in Part 3 we will examine the process of creating a dream dental team with a winning attitude. When it comes down to it unless we work alone our effectiveness as clinicians will be largely impacted by our overall unity and by the alignment of our collective efforts with our co-workers. There is a big difference between a group of highly skilled individuals versus a group of people who are truly playing together as a team. In the words of the great business mind John C.

Maxwell... "You don't grow a business you grow the people within your business then together you can take your business anywhere!"

Now for Part 1 ... Let's take a moment to consider how dentistry has evolved over the past several decades. It used to be that a dental office was the last place anyone wanted to be. It was associated with negative images of pain and physical disability serviced in an emotionally disconnected environment. These days are gone. These paradigms or belief systems about the field of dentistry are quickly being replaced by more positive and life enhancing images of comfort, connection, and service.

Television shows like *Extreme Makeover* have brought 21st century dentistry, and how it can dramatically change people's lives, to the forefront of public awareness. And negative statements like ... "If you don't brush your teeth you'll have to go to the dentist" or "I'd rather go to the dentist than go out with him" are quickly being left in the past. In fact today the public is becoming more and more aware that beautiful smiles are not just for the rich and famous, but can be for anyone and our old-school role as the "fire department alleviate pain clinic" is now quickly fading away and being replaced by images of quality of life dental care.

The 21st century is such an amazing time to be in our wonderful profession. From a technical standpoint we've got better diagnostic tools, better materials, and greater clinical and theoretical knowledge. Today we are a much more experienced profession with diversely trained clinicians. Compare this to how society saw us just 25 years ago when the services patients expected to receive could be grouped into one of five most common categories – Drill-Fill-Pull-Dentures-Cleaning. In those days the use of dentistry generally occurred when someone was experiencing a problematic dental condition which they could no longer ignore or live with. The interaction in the office tended to be very generic, subservient, and somewhat routine. Patients walked into the office clutching their wallets tightly while waving the almighty insurance booklet in the air "here's my problem Doc; what is the minimal thing you can do to fix it that will be covered by my insurance – and could you please keep the pain down to a minimum because you know no one really likes being

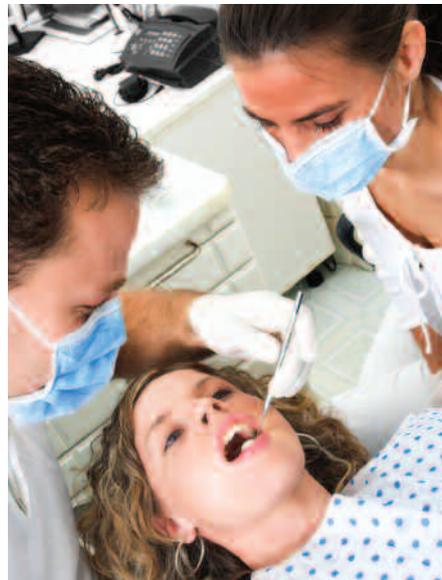
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here.” This preamble was usually followed by a reluctant baton pass by the patient to us at which point we proceeded to put the patient through a very clinical and somewhat routine system of diagnoses and treatment delivery. It was a very technical, unemotional and generic process that locked dentistry into an emotionally disconnected reparative image of “fixing your unexpected dental problems at a high cost and sometimes with some physical discomfort.”

The good news today is that dentistry is undergoing a major transformation in the way we do business and service our patients. The entire dental community including labs, distributors, manufacturers and service companies are one by one repackaging (rebranding) their products and services into a more people friendly human touch experience. Today we live in a service-based economy. The average dental consumer expects quality and service delivered in an honest, caring, and loving environment. Our patient’s values have evolved to a point where the most significant part of your practice is no longer the clinical dentistry. Today the most significant part of your practice is you. Please do not assume, even for a moment, that I am negating the importance of clinical excellence. Quality is extremely important. The reality, however, is that when choosing you as their health care provider your patients, more often than not, can’t really distinguish between the qualities of available choices (clinicians).

When people make a decision to accept your dental care they are making a decision to accept you – “You” the person not “You” the dentist. The patient’s relationship with you and your entire team is the most important element in a successful practice. Patients are committed to us, not to our facilities, our clinical procedures, or our instruments. The difference between good dentistry and great dentistry will never be as clear to them or impress them as much as a good relationship with you will. Their commitment to your business is primarily based on how you make them feel while they are in your presence receiving your care. Simply put, people may forget what you said and what you did but people will never forget how you made them feel and this memory will linger long after they have forgotten which tooth you crowned.

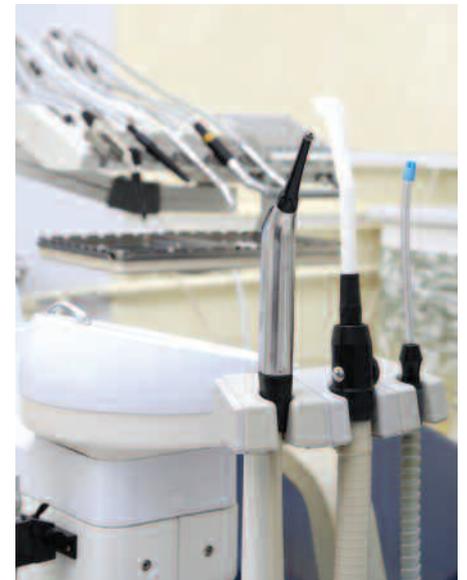
Let’s face it; as people and as dental patients it is our basic human nature to want to feel genuinely respected and cared for especially when it comes to placing our health and quality of life in the hands of professionals. The challenge for our profession is that with all the technical learning and training dentists receive something begins to get lost and fade away. While vigorously pursuing clinical excellence is it possible that we begin losing sight of the people attached to the teeth? Is it possible that our clinical focus has diminished our human connection and relationship skills? After years of consulting/coaching dental teams and individual clinicians it is my experience that our communication can very often appear cold and disconnected to



people because it is delivered in a very technical manner devoid of emotion and human connection. As a profession if we are to succeed in repositioning the old school negative paradigms society holds about dentistry then we must begin to look beyond the instruments we are holding in our hands. In our hands we are, in fact, holding the life and feelings of the person attached to the teeth. Patients are filtering all decisions they make through their feelings and personal life circumstances. The time we take to build strong personal relationships with our patients will have a huge impact on our overall ability to sell the full scope of our services. Relationships strengthen your likeability and likeability leads to case acceptance. If I like you and show you that I do you’re going to have a

tendency to like me. If you like me you will have a tendency to trust me. If you trust me you’ll have a tendency to believe the things I say. And if you believe the things I say you’ll have greater tendency to accept my treatment advice. Likeability leads to case acceptance and likeability can only be developed by building strong personal relationships with each one of our patients. A people-centred business feels and sounds much different from the traditional generic transaction-oriented business.

We should all take a closer look at our own practice to explore where we stand in our human relations effectiveness. Are you merely processing your patients through a series of generic transactions or are you taking the time to get to know your cus-

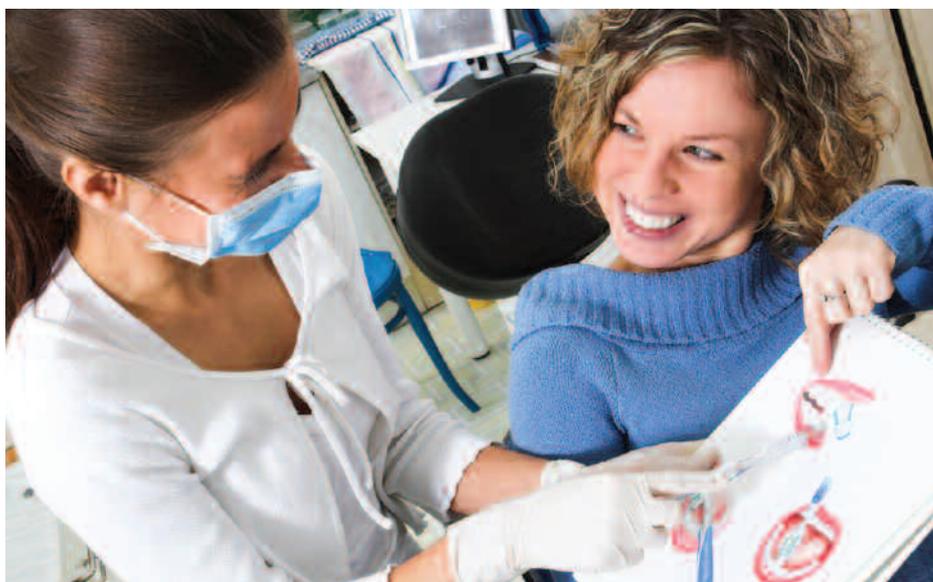


tomers, their beliefs, their desires and their fears. Two people can only achieve a strong relationship by reaching beyond the boundaries they usually maintain between themselves and strangers. When we reach out to patients we begin delivering a more connected caring experience. Our ability to reach is driven by our attitudes or what we focus on – as the old saying goes “our eyes cannot see what our mind has not taught us to recognize.” If we focus on dentistry we will not see people and our patients will not feel connected to us nor will they be as inspired by our ideas of how we can help them. But if you focus on people then in subtle, powerful, and unseen ways your inner attitude will create patterns of behaviour and communication that are very powerful in influencing and inspiring peo-

ple. This adjustment of focus is not really that difficult. For many it is merely a matter of genuinely reconnecting with your authentic, non-dental, self which is the way we thought and saw things before the world of dentistry started crowding our thinking. There is a buzz word being used today to describe what we are talking about, it is called “Emotional Intelligence” (EI). In our highly technological world raising our emotional intelligence is becoming more and more important so as to not dehumanize the value of dentistry. Human talk, not dental jargon is the language your patients will understand and feel the most.

the single most important factor in job performance and advancement is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is what sets the stars apart from the mediocre.”

The success of a dental practice like any business is directly related to customer loyalty and loyalty is derived from relationships of trust, respect and connection. This kind of loyalty can only happen with employees who are passionately dedicated to developing genuine human connections with people. In the words of Dr. Paul Homoly of The Homoly Communications Institute “4 years of dental school spent studying the medical and technical aspects



There is much literature based on solid research today to support the importance of raising our emotional intelligence in the work place. In his groundbreaking book *Working with Emotional Intelligence* researcher Daniel Goleman makes this important point, “Paradoxically, IQ has the least power in predicting success among that pool of people smart enough to handle the most cognitively demanding, fields, and the value of emotional intelligence for success grows more powerful the higher the intelligence barriers for entry into a field. In MBA programs or in careers like engineering, law, or medicine (dentistry), where professional selection focuses almost exclusively on intellectual abilities, emotional intelligence carries much more weight than IQ in determining who emerges as a leader. Today in all fields of human endeavour, society is realizing that

of fixing the tooth have contracted our human connection skills”. A highly successful clinician once said to me “Peter I’ve never seen a set of teeth walk into an office.” How true; they are always attached to a person with unique needs, beliefs, desires, and personal life circumstances. It’s when we focus primarily on the teeth that patients will have generic low fulfillment uninspiring dental experience. Patients come into the practice with a suitcase full of everything that is going on in their lives. Our job is to fit the dentistry into that suitcase not into their mouths. We must find the patient’s heart before searching for their teeth. If all you have is a hammer, then everything will look like a nail – similarly in dentistry if all you see is your repertoire of skills then every patient will look like a tooth and your case presentation will sound very technical with low

“emotional appeal” to the patient. Ultimately it comes down to this, “Your dentistry gets you into a game where relationships win.” Today people want products and services that create powerful and enduring emotional connections. The real question is how can we nurture and develop this kind of caring passion for customers in the hearts and minds of every member of our team.

The entire team must take a step back to remember that, you’re not in the dental business; you’re in the people business. But don’t put unnecessary pressure on yourselves. The fact of the matter is that you don’t have to have a magnificent personality in order to connect with your patients and have a powerful impact on their lives. Don’t label yourself as introverted or extroverted. The most important key to quality communication and interaction is *developing a genuine child-like curious interest in the person you’re talking with*. Remember; what you focus on (people versus teeth.) will affect your ability to get curious and interested. You can get to know your patients by asking quality questions. Then you must have a sincere interest in hearing the answers. The best communicators very often say the least and are the best listeners. The same rule applies to the most effective ethical sales people. Remember it’s not the extrovert who dominates the conversation that a client feels most connected with, but rather the individual who shows a real and sincere interest in knowing about the life of the person they’re talking with. The true secret of success is to find the heart of the patient and not their teeth. All you really need to be is a caring soul and inevitably you will soon find out that learning from and connecting with people is a much more powerful and rewarding experience than simply serving customer’s needs. This approach will create an immediate expansion in the level of fulfillment you will feel from your work. Every client has a story. As practitioners, we need to speak less and listen more. We must take the time to understand our client’s needs and where they are coming from, and only then can we begin to help them within the context of their lives. In fact this approach will even help them to respond to our treatment better and we will ultimately feel more rewarded.

So what percentage of your daily interaction with patients is transactional as

opposed to relational? I recently asked a young graduate dentist this question because he felt his case presentations were not yielding the results he desired based on his efforts put forth. His response to me was quite interesting, “Peter; I connect with people but I don’t know if I can do that fluff stuff.” I then asked him, “are you sure your patients are feeling the level of connection you think you’re creating?” Sometimes we might feel we are taking this relationship stuff too far – but are we? Our level of connection with people really is the catalyst that will enable us to grow patient interest towards the full scope of things we can do for them. Understand when you’re filling a tooth or performing a small procedure, the patient is buying a commodity and you can get away with selling the procedure without building a deep relationship. But when you are involved in multidisciplinary comprehensive dentistry where the fees are higher and the services become more involved patients need a deeper relationship. It is my belief that everyone should be treated with the same personalized care and respect regardless of how much they are spending in your practice. However, having said this, we cannot ignore the common business phenomena that leads dental consumers to expect more caring and personalized treatment at the \$5,000 level than at the \$500 level.

As previously mentioned strong relationships can only be built when we reach beyond the boundaries we are used to maintaining between ourselves and strangers. The following is a list of things we can do to strengthen our personal connection and overall ability to lead our patients.

- Before seeing your next patient take a brief moment to clear your heart and mind for them.
- When scheduling procedures always factor in connection time into your estimated appointment length.
- Relationship building is a two-way process which means that it’s OK to share personal stories that allows patients to get to know who you are as a person.
- Be genuinely interested in them and avoid insincere dialogues (baby talk, overly sweet niceness, counterfeit sincerity, superficial pleasantries).

- Listen to your patients. If they are quiet, guide them by asking insightful questions.
- At the end of each patient visit briefly ask yourself “how connected was my last patient to me?” To find the answer look into your own heart ... “as connected as I felt to them and not much more.” Patients can feel our sincerity and this will be mirrored back to us through their feelings.

In his book *The Likability Factor*, Tim Sanders makes the argument that more than any other quality; success in life is in direct correlation to one’s personal appeal. It may sound like “pie in the sky, chicken soup for the soul” but he backs his arguments with statistics, anecdotes, and academic studies from sources as far reaching as the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Stanford, Yale, and the University of Toronto to support his claim. He breaks down the process of likeability into a metaphor of driving down a road in your car and coming to a series of intersections with stop lights – each intersection representing one of the four components important to achieving high level likeability. When you achieve one component the light turns green and you can drive on to the next traffic light and so on and so forth. The following is a summary of the four components to achieving extraordinarily likeability.

1. **Friendliness.** Your ability to communicate liking and openness to others
2. **Relevance.** Your capacity to connect with others interests, wants, and needs
3. **Empathy.** Your ability to recognize, understand and acknowledge other peoples’ feelings
4. **Realness.** The integrity that stands behind your likeability and guarantees its authenticity

“Customer relations” is the main area where we can shine in our patient’s hearts thereby cultivating intense loyalty. Remember no two practices can be virtually identical in the people they attract, the work they inspire, the information they pass on, or the emotions and feelings they create. It is impossible! Human beings are too diverse and their interactions in different environments only magnify those differences. We all have walked into a company and immediately detected these forces at work. Passion, energy, caring, and opti-



mism in a dynamic service company, all these qualities are palpable within the first 15 seconds of entering the reception room. You can read the DNA of a company from the receptionist and discover it replicated throughout the practice. Dentistry is no different. You must believe you are worth more to your clients than what you sell. Remember we are not in the “dentistry profession” serving people; we are in the “people business” providing dentistry. Your dentistry gets you into a game where relationships win. Grow your business one relationship at a time.

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