



## Success Through Simplicity

Most things in life are quite simple; unfortunately we humans love to complicate them. In this age of more complexity, our environment and our circumstances, tend to direct our lives at an ever-increasing pace. This is especially true in dentistry. Time was, that we, as dentists, were able to go to our offices, do the dentistry we were trained to do, with little outside interference, and far less stress.

Having had the opportunity to personally observe hundreds of dental practices has proven to me that most of the stress, complexity, and interferences we experience in dentistry are the direct result of dentists being reactive in nature. Doctors going through life with no clear plan, or even a clear idea, of the way they want their practice to be. In fact, most of us battle through life hoping that each day will just turn out okay, often finding ourselves frustrated with our career of choice.

Almost everyone feels the frustration of having too little time. No matter how hard we try, we just can't stretch it far enough. An ancient Chinese proverb says, "In addition to the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone". The wisdom of life reflects the elimination of non-essentials. Do we really think of leaving things undone as a noble art? Most of us don't. After all, being busy is a virtue, and more is better, right? When things go undone, we feel guilty and frustrated, wanting to do more, not less. Yet, the inevitable truth is that--We can't do everything and-- the wisdom of life truly is, the elimination of non-essentials.

Maybe this is the key we've been missing. Leave the essentials undone, and we have problems. Leave non-essentials undone, and nothing happens. Just make sure the things you don't have time for--are the non-essentials! The difficult part, of course, is separating essentials from non-essentials (they don't usually come neatly labeled). When cleaning time comes, we wonder why in the world we ever saved so much junk! However, at the time, those things probably looked essential. Pondering this thought the other day, while cleaning out a closet -I asked myself "Isn't it amazing how many things we can actually live without?"

Identifying the essentials requires thinking about what YOU want to accomplish, and considering which activities will actually help you achieve the intended result. What contributes, and what doesn't? When we stop to think about it, most of us have little difficulty separating the two--It's just that we don't often stop to think about it. Distinguishing essentials and from non-essentials often requires less effort than we imagine. Failure to drop the non-essentials exposes us to severe risk. As we clutter up our lives with junk and problems, it would be helpful for us to pause now and then, and clean out the closets of our lives. By doing so, we learn to focus on the essential rather than worrying about the non-essentials that we no longer have time for.

Realizing that less than 1% of readers will even begin to look at their lives and their practices, much less make a list of how they really want things to be, I ask -- Isn't it odd? We, who profess to be perfectionists, willing to go the extra mile for our patients, doing the best technical dentistry we know how to do, are very willing to have NO MASTER PLAN for how our own lives and businesses will turn out! For the past 18 years, dentistry has been a no-brainer. Most dentists putting it on cruise control did all right. Teeth repaired 20 to 30 years ago began breaking down. With the economy booming, all we had to do was be halfway engaged--and we did better than the average independent business owner!



We could be sloppy with our overhead, let the chips fall where they may, and not pay much attention to running our dental business--and still do okay. For those who graduated in the past 18 years, dentistry should have been a gold mine!

The economy of the past is no guarantee of the same in the future; in fact, it may very well be the opposite. Today we are seeing the beginning of a significant economic slowdown. With tens of thousands of workers being laid off, the stock market still in the doldrums and consumer debt at a historic high -- there is no reason to think that an economic boom will continue, unabated into the future.

What will happen should that ripple in the economy reach dentistry? Today, we're beginning to see some negative economic effect on dental practices a time when we should be more discretionary than ever! Should this be more than a simple ripple, I see many dentists ill prepared. Many dentists currently in practice were not yet in the profession during the devastating recession of 1979-1983. Consequently, allowing them to experience the business of dentistry only within the past 18 years -- a period of time considered by many to be the Golden Age of Dentistry. Interesting enough, many dentists who were in practice, during the painful period of 1979-1983, have long since forgotten those extremely difficult and stressful times.

Intense review of these dental practices indicated that in good economic times, 90% of these dental practices to be ABOVE the pain-line ---enjoying moderate to spectacular economic success. But, even in good economic times, the other 10% BELOW the pain-line were struggling to attain a reasonable level of profitability. During the recession of 1979-1983, an interesting situation occurred. In the face of severe economic downturn, the most structured practices, by way of well thought out plans weathered the storm. The top 10% of these practices, continuing to be quite successful! However, the other 80% of practices (which in good economic times had been successful) ultimately dropped below the pain-line and began to suffer economically--then joining the bottom 10% of practices those, previously financially unsuccessful even in good economic times.

Simply put, my opinion is that the top 10% of dental practices has been quite successful in any economic condition -- And the bottom 10% has been un-successful during the same times. The middle 80% have fluctuated between successful and unsuccessful, depending on the economy (in other words, a good economy allowed the middle 80% to be successful, in spite of themselves). Their apparent success (though lacking of sound fiscal and practice management void of superb management skills), quickly disappeared with downward changes in the economy, causing them to rapidly slide into financial distress.

So, if the threat of a recession reaching into dentistry is real (and I think it is) -- How do we recession-proof our practices? I believe the answer to be that we must be pro-active. In the end, the secret to being successful in tough economic times is to be successful even before those times occur! (Even if you are already successful, you must strive to become fundamentally strong and do those things consistently that differentiate them from the crowd. You must not rest on your laurels, but strive to manage your practice in such a way that you attain and remain in the top 10% of dentists nationwide).



Fact is, that most things are probably far simpler than we realize. This is true even when it comes to managing.

Years ago, Peter Drucker (famed management guru), said that there were only three rules for being an effective manager.

Rule One: Make sure people know what to do.

Rule Two: Make sure they have what they need to do it.

Rule Three: Make sure they are doing it.

Tom Peters and Bob Waterman, in their best-selling book *In Search of Excellence*, suggested the rule of Management-By-Walking-Around. Drucker would probably agree with their suggestion of circulating amongst the employee's on a regular basis. Being involved, evaluating if the employee's are actually doing what they are supposed to be doing-You'll learn a lot that way! Bob Basso, author of *This Job Should Be Fun!* suggested another piece of simple advice. He called it Management By Getting Out of the Way. Like Drucker, Mr. Basso proposed three rules.

Rule One: Give people something important to do.

Rule Two: Give them the authority to do it.

Rule Three: Get out of their way and let them do it.

Mr. Drucker would probably approve of this advice, as well. He recently said that most companies have far too many rules. He even went on to say that most of the rules were largely the result of management paranoia. That certainly implies that many managers are getting in the way of better results. In fact, some people now say that management is the single greatest impediment to improving company performance.

The buzzword today is empowering employees. Following some of these "rules" would quickly achieve that. We can all be good managers when we learn to set aside our irrational need to control everything, and everyone. Perhaps our most important new focus and goal should be...

**--TO HAVE FEWER RULES, AND CLEARLY FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIALS!**