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Introduction

Practicing dentistry just wasn't fun anymore for Dr. Pain. In his early days, Dr. Pain had, what many considered, a highly successful practice. Patients loved Dr. Pain and the care he showed them. Dr. Pain certainly had a lot to be proud of.

Amazing how things can change so quickly and so dramatically. Now, each day was a struggle for him. The constantly changing rules of reimbursement, having to deal with staff issues, and staying current on the latest technology were too much for him to manage. He constantly snapped at his team members and had to be pulled away from checking his e-mail on his desktop computer to care for patients. After twenty years of practice, Dr. Pain was burned out. He'd leave each night with just enough energy to pour a drink and plant himself in front of the television before drifting off to sleep, only to wake up and do it all again the next day. He saw fewer and fewer new patients, and the quality of work he provided was plummeting. His frustrated staff stopped giving extra effort when it came to collecting from patients and third-party payers. It became more and more difficult to meet his monthly overhead. Just before the practice reached a crisis level, he began to reduce the size of his staff, which, in turn, placed additional burdens on those who remained.

As luck would have it, a colleague suggested Dr. Pain attend a practice management seminar to see if there were any "golden nuggets" he could use. Although he held out little hope, at least he could commiserate with others who were in the same position as he. Friday came and he recognized several local area dentists. Sam, a dentist who had a practice just a few blocks away, was there. Dr. Pain guessed that Sam never saw as many patients as he did in his heyday. Yet here was Sam, well-dressed and seemingly doing well. Sam brought his entire team unlike Dr. Pain. The team seemed eager to learn as they took notes throughout the morning event.

After the seminar, Dr. Pain approached Sam asking, "Tell me Sam, my production seems to have hit a plateau over the last few years and I'm having a difficult time keeping my head above water - you seem to be

doing well, what is the secret?" Sam turned and responded, "Things are different, that's for sure. I realized that if I sat around hoping for changes to come to me, nothing would happen. I decided I needed to go out and make things happen. So, for the last two years I have been attending seminars and workshops. I noticed something by attending them – I was introduced to teams that were achieving high levels of success and decided that if they could do it, we could do it too. I went back to my team and told them what I wanted to accomplish. I told them we needed help, that we couldn't move forward regardless of how much we tried. So we hired a practice management firm and they began by refining our practice 'vision.' We finally had some direction we could all rally around. We set some goals, achieved them, celebrated and then set more aggressive goals. We learned how to put systems in place and let the systems run the practice. We focused on results, not activities. And, I learned to become a better leader. Our consultant told me that in order for the practice to grow, we all needed to grow personally, including me. They established accountabilities which, I learned, my team really needed and wanted. Before we knew it, we were breaking records each month! It was the best thing I ever did."

The two shook hands and as Dr. Pain walked towards his car he thought to himself, "Just like Sam to get fooled into using some consultant. Heck, I never used one!"

While this story is a satire about the plight of Dr. Pain, the truth is, there are many dentists walking in his shoes. I've been blessed to speak with many dentists, in all parts of the country, in practices big and small, and I learned that even those who know their purpose and recognize their path often appear paralyzed, unable to make progress towards their goals. There is a gap between where they are and where they want to be. It's almost as though there is an invisible force holding them back. Can you relate to this? Is there a gap between where you are and where you want to be? If so, it is time for a breakthrough.

So how do you know when something is holding you back? Here are a few signs:

- Despite your passion or desire for a better practice, you do not take steps to attain it
- You believe that others, possibly even your team, have held you back or hindered you in some way
- You feel stuck
- You allow fear to control your decisions
- You sidestep issues that need to be addressed in order to avoid conflict or disappointment
- You are waiting on perfect circumstances before you take a step forward

It's time for you to conquer the issues and challenges that are preventing you from achieving your full potential. It's time to discover and break free from whatever is holding you back. Be forewarned, to breakthrough what's ailing your practice takes work, it takes focus, it takes guts, and it may even bring a few tears. This is not a *self-help book* per se, but a *helping book*. Breaking-through is an inside job, and this book is intended to help you peel back the onion on your beliefs and assumptions that have kept you living smaller than you deserve.

Perhaps your practice is doing pretty well and you're thinking you don't need this book. Maybe only a few areas inside your practice are "suffering." Or maybe things are good most of the time, and they suck some of the time. This book offers everyone, regardless of their situation, a road map out of hell.

You can either continue putting up with your pain and die a little more each day, or you can find a way out. Like a patient presented with a treatment plan, you get to choose what is best for you.

Think Differently

Have you ever wondered why some dentists are so successful? They may not be the most clinically gifted dentists, and yet they seem to have achieved a level of success you have not. And you begin to ponder “why them?” You have just as much talent (probably more), scored well on your boards, have taken tons of additional CE, patients seem to like you, and yet others are more successful than you. Why?

This book is meant to help you think differently about your practice, about patients, about your teammates, and about your life. The reason why most dentists never seem to achieve the kind of results they hoped for is because they think the same way they always thought. You see, successful people think differently than others. In my book, I will pass along timeless principles used by highly successful people that have helped them achieve the same kind of results you are looking to achieve. By implementing these principles in your practice, you will begin to create your new approach to living the life you want and getting the rewards you deserve.

For years, I have been a “student” of success, intrigued by why some dental practices seem to stumble into success while others struggle just to get by. This book is a compilation of what I learned over the course of 20 years.

Based on discussions with dentists, this is what I know: While dentists may be frustrated with the hoops insurance companies force them to jump through, or with patients who say no to necessary treatment, or with staff members who take their jobs for granted... they are more frustrated with the conflict they must deal with between the ***business*** of dentistry and the ***practice*** of dentistry. And, quite frankly, most of this frustration was caused by the very dental schools that helped dentists learn the skills necessary to perform quality dentistry. You had some great instructors who taught you the technical skills but failed to teach you anything about

how to build a successful practice. Dental schools are focused on teaching you how to be an **effective** dentist but neglected to teach you how to be a **successful** dentist. This is why many practices are not achieving the kind of results they want or need.

When I ask dentists if they could separate their practice into ten different parts (clinical, marketing, sales, human resources, managing, training, hiring & firing, etc) and then tell me how many of them they enjoy doing, they usually respond that they enjoy about four of them. That's only 40%! I then ask how much longer they want to practice dentistry. Twenty more years is the average. So, while the answers vary a bit, here is the conclusion: they plan to enjoy only 8 of their next 20 years of practice (40%). How sad is that?

Success, whatever you define it to be, is possible for you and your practice. The fundamentals are the same regardless of the type of practice you have, its size or location. The principles and strategies are the same. You only need to learn and apply them to transform your practice and your life.

One of the keys is that learning how to think differently requires a sustained effort to change years' worth of beliefs, opinions, and past experiences. It is natural for obstacles to appear now and then. Growth doesn't come without its pitfalls. Your level of commitment shows up during these times. Many often quit, drop-out, give up, or check-out. Those who hang in there eventually realize a breakthrough, and they are happy they had the fortitude to stay with it. So be patient, and don't give up. Principles are natural laws and they *always* work and they will for you and your practice as well.

Improvement versus Development

As you begin your reading, I want to make a distinction between the words *improvement* and *development*. Improvement implies

you already know what needs to be done and it is just a matter of doing it more, better and faster. Improvement suggests that you and your practice are on the “right” path, and if you can increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of what you are doing, success will be yours. While all practices can benefit from improvement, a majority of the dental practices I visit require a deeper, more drastic process called “development.” Development is about learning new ways to do things. Development suggests that new knowledge, or a new way of looking at old problems, is required to improve the operations of the practice. It implies that you’ve tried every tool on your tool belt and nothing seems to have worked. It requires new action, new thinking, new knowledge.

Consider this: you didn’t learn how to walk by crawling so fast that you magically “lifted” to your feet and began walking did you? Of course not. Learning to walk is development, it is not improvement. Likewise, if you are challenged by a high number of cancellations and no-shows, you aren’t going to reduce them by learning how to schedule more efficiently, are you? Instead, you need to develop new skills designed to eliminate and minimize these from occurring regularly.

Since development includes learning new skills and gaining new knowledge, it is considered **transformational**. Transformation is lasting. Transformation becomes second-nature because habits are being formed. Compare that to improvement, which is **transactional**. Transactional is temporary. Transactional change must always be top-of-mind and is not habit-forming. Human nature proves that we are really pretty good at changing behaviors in the short run, but over time we fall back into our old behaviors. The fact is, most changes people make are transactional: drug users often return to a life of drugs after rehab, criminals typically struggle when released from jail and return to a life of crime, and Lotto winners usually lose their fortune within a short period after winning because they don’t know how to deal with all the money.

Most consulting firms are transactional – they teach how to do things faster or more efficiently. They may offer some “new” learning, but it is typically stuff you already knew and forgot. While improvement is never a bad thing, the growth will last as long as the consultant sticks around, and once they leave, the improvement follows shortly thereafter. It is like blowing up a balloon without tying the end. As soon as you let it go, it flies all over the room. Without tying it off, you get frustrated and while it may be fun for a time, it quickly becomes tiring and expensive.

Compare this to a consultant that teaches you the principles and the techniques that transform your practice forever. He will show you what you need to know so you can handle similar situations in the future without needing him by your side. It’s kind of like learning to ride a bike, once you learn how to maintain your balance, you will never need training wheels again. Besides, who wants to be “tied” to a consultant for the rest of your practice days?

The bottom line is this: I believe that your practice can succeed, that all practices can be more successful, and it happens when people in the practice succeed. You see, business succeeds when people develop. And when I say people, I am not suggesting it is just your team that needs improving, I am including you - the doctor - in this equation as well. Business improves when people develop. A rather simple statement, but it works that way in every area of business: sales get better when salespeople develop, customer service gets better when customer service people develop, ***dental practices succeed when team members develop***, and so on. Hopefully this belief system will help you better understand why I place so much importance on People Development and Leadership Growth. In all my years of learning, these may be the greatest pearls of wisdom I can share with you.

Consider this: if coins keep falling out of a hole in your pocket, the answer is not to go out and make more money. The answer is to plug the hole.

I grew up in New Jersey, you know, “Exit 9.” Jersey people can get in your face if they want to. And so can your practice. If your practice is getting in your face, you might want to know why so you can do something before it gets worse. As you face and plug each hole, you will not only transform your practice, you will transform your life.

The goal of this book is to help you find and patch any leaks in your practice. It is honest and practical with teeth. I want this book to be useable, not just readable. Most dental practices are not operating at their capacity, and many are under-performing at alarming rates. And it isn’t for a lack of trying. I want to help dentists and team members fulfill their potential making their work more fun and more satisfying. Given the nature of your work, you deserve it!

How this Book is Structured

I have broken down the book into three sections. The chapters in the first section include information that is foundational and meant to help you to start thinking differently about your practice and your life. You will start by exploring these topics: Leadership, Taking Responsibility, Understanding the Meaning of Your Practice, Determining What You Want, Creating Positive Change, etc. Because some of these principles build on the ones before them, it is best to read Section I in order.

In Section II, every chapter tackles a different challenge. These fundamentals are a result of years of observation and experience in learning what works and what doesn’t. You can read these chapters in any order, so feel free to jump to the chapter that interests you most. However, it’s best if you read all the chapters in Section I before moving to Sections II and III.

The last section of the book encompasses elements that will help “fine-tune” how you practice dentistry. It’s the proverbial “icing on the cake” – but it will only take hold if you have implemented elements from Sections I and II.

I have provided some application exercises to deepen your understanding of each chapter's contents. These are intended to illustrate how the ideas and principles can be applied through action.

This is a very content-rich book packed with fresh ideas. Take as much time as you need to read it, and don't feel you have to race to the end. This book is meant to serve you in personal growth, and how that plays out is up to you.

My promise to you as you read this book is threefold. First, I have no interest in filling your head with false notions. Unfortunately, there is far too much of that going on today. Everything in the book is straightforward and honest. Second, I hope to connect with you, human to human, and serve as a guide and friend, not as some mystical know-it-all guru. And finally, I hope to help you face the fears that have been holding you back from playing a bigger game. Throughout the book I will be encouraging, supportive and challenging. Please know my goal is to help you think differently. While growth and success are never easy, they are always worthwhile!

A few words before you begin your journey. The process of *Building Your Dream Practice* takes focus, determination, discipline and commitment. Developing your dream requires heavy lifting and it is not for the feint-of-heart. If it were easy, every dental practice would be a "dream practice." Don't be dissuaded by those few dentists who made their success seem effortless. It looks easy because they intentionally think and behave differently. And it can for you as well.

Good Reading!