

# Playing a game of Tug-of-War with your practice

by Art Deden

Ever play tug-of-war? I am sure you have...two teams on opposing ends of the rope try to pull the other across a dividing center-line. Operating your practice is like a game of tug-of-war but instead of two teams opposing one another, there are three teams. Imagine, if you can, a three-way game of Tug of war where all three are pulling to gain control. According to Michael Gerber, the author of the book *The E-Myth Revisited*, this is what goes on in most every business. Gerber claims that within each business owner are three different personalities each trying to dominate the other two. Only by creating a balance can a business begin to thrive.

Hello again, Art Deden here and this month's topic is an interesting one to me because it points to the heart of what I believe in so strongly. We are going to talk about the reasons why some dental practices seem to have it all while others barely eek by.

During the course of my work, I get to speak with lots of dentists. And each time I do, I learn more and more about who they are as individuals, as dentists, as leaders, as businesspeople, as husbands, as mothers. You see, I am always interested in learning how people work, how dental practices operate, and more importantly, how people and dental practices work together to achieve the results they do.

As I mentioned earlier, the topic of success has always been intriguing to me – so much so - I have been researching it for a number of years and during that time, I've learned quite a bit about what makes a dental practice tick and what holds it back.

Based on discussions with dentists in large practices and in small practices, with dentists in big cities and with dentists in small towns, this is what I know: While dentists maybe 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 who 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** and neglecting to teach you how to be a **successful dentist**. And this is why many practices are not achieving the kind of results they want or need.

According to the book *The E-Myth Revisited*, which – if you hadn't read yet, you need to – dentists are left feeling overwhelmed with the business end of dentistry because they're trapped by the very thing they love - the technical work - and unfortunately that limits their abilities to operate a practice successfully. Gerber calls this the "entrepreneurial myth" or E-Myth. The problem is that this limitation often leads to frustration because dentists need more than a technician's skill to build a thriving practice and achieve all her goals. According to Gerber, every business, regardless of the type of business, requires three distinct levels of work: *the work of the Entrepreneur* – I sometimes interchange Gerber's term entrepreneur with the word LEADER. They also need *the work of the Manager* and they need *the work of the Technician*.

Leader, Manager, Technician – the relationship between the three is critical. In dental practices the dentist assumes the role of Technician and focuses little attention on the other two functions. After all, that is what they were trained to do -- perform the technical work of dentistry. Truth is, most practices are *out of balance*. They are missing critical ingredients. You wouldn't perform a root canal without fully understanding tooth anatomy? Of course not...then why would you operate your practice without the necessary knowledge to make it successful?

The key to creating and sustaining a successful practice is knowing how to transform yourself from a successful Technician to becoming a successful Leader-Manager-Technician. In the process of transforming yourself, the practice will be transformed as well. Most often, a dentist who lacks skills in either the Leader or Manager roles will compensate their shortfall by pursuing additional clinical skill training. Often I see the most clinically gifted dentists struggling with their practice while the more balanced dentists are thriving. Unfortunately, most practices fail to reach their potential not because the doctor *won't* incorporate the other two roles, **but because he cant! He hasn't been trained to do so**

If you feel this assessment may be too harsh, consider the following: assume that as the end of the month approaches, your production is \$6,000 below your goal. This shortfall will hurt financially. If you had two additional hours to spend that month on solving your problem, and you could only do one of the following two things, what would you do?

1. Prep a veneer case for a patient who will pay in full on the first appointment? **OR**
2. Call a team meeting to discuss ways to create and keep the doctor's schedule full, not only for this month, but for future months as well?

If you chose *prep the veneer case*, you are likely trying to solve your production problem from the role of technician. Starting the case **will** solve the short-term problem, but it will do nothing to uncover the root cause of the problem (such as system breakdowns in scheduling, marketing, or treatment acceptance) nor will it create solutions for similar problems in the future.

Before we talk about how to become better balanced, we need to clarify what each role looks like. The Entrepreneur – or Leader as I call it – is the visionary, the dreamer. She serves as the energy behind the practice, especially in the early days. The leader lives in the future, never in the past and rarely in the present. Always at its best dealing with the unknown, they are looking to create probabilities out of possibilities. They have an extraordinary need for control and often create a great deal of havoc around them and among the team. To many entrepreneur's, most people are problems that get in the way of dreams.

Now let's take a look at the Manager. The manager is very pragmatic. Without a manager type there would be very little order, not much planning of any sort and very little predictability. The manager is the type of person who will organize the shelf where patient charts sit so it looks clean and organized. *While the Leader lives in the future*, the manager lives in the past. *Where the leader craves control*, the manager craves order. *Where the leader sees opportunities*, the manager sees problems. But don't underestimate the role of the manager. Without the Manager, there would be no business...and without the entrepreneur, there would be no creativity and uniqueness.

The Technician is someone I am sure you know quite well. In 99.9% of all practices, the technician is YOU. The technician is a doer. They love to tinker and fix things. If there is a technical problem, they have a solution – or at least they will find one. The Technician lives in the present and hates the changes the future always seems to bring. The technician knows that if it weren't for her, the world would be in more trouble than it already is...nothing would get done, because lots of people are out there just *thinking about it*. To the technician, everyone just seems to get in their way. Perhaps this is why most dentists feel, "If it weren't for the people, this job would be perfect!"

To the manager, the technician becomes a problem to be managed. To the technician, the manager becomes a meddler to be avoided. To both of them, the leader is the one who got them into trouble in the first place.

The fact is, we all have varying degrees of Leader, manager and technician within us. And if they were well balanced, we would be talking about a highly successful dental practice. What happens in most practices, however, is that the technician is in charge and lacks the skills needed to lead and manage the practice effectively.

In the early stages of a practice, when it is just starting out, this is not much of a problem. But as the practice grows and matures, it reaches a point beyond the technicians comfort zone. Everyone knows that in order to grow it requires change and technicians flat-out hate change. This becomes a liability for the practice. And since technician's are doers, the practice's limitation is also determined by how much the technician can do himself. Out of desperation, most dentists facing this problem abdicate the "management" of the practice to someone else, usually the front office person. The hope is that this team member will handle it all and leave the doctor to his patients. This can be a huge mistake. If left to operate this way, the practice often falls on the whims and moods of the staff. If they happen to be in the mood to get the job done, it gets done. If they're not, it doesn't. Under this scenario, there is no consistency and a haunting question is always present, "**How do I keep my staff in the mood?**" This may be why there is so much talk about the need for Bonus programs in dental practices!

At this critical point there are only three ways a dental practice can turn - it will either fail altogether and be sold, or it will achieve a level of production that makes it feel more "manageable", or - it grows wildly out-of-control. My experience is that most practices prefer to halt their growth. In this stage, also known as Stagnation, the production and collections ebb and flow – not really growing, but not really declining. It just sort of "hangs" there. In essence, the practice is subconsciously resisting any new growth fearing that it will cause them discomfort.

Unfortunately, a practice that doesn't grow can implode upon itself. They become stuck in a rut and eventually they atrophy because they can't do anything else. They seem to lose their way, their passion disappears and they begin to wander aimlessly through their day. Have you ever been in a practice like this? You only need to sit in the reception area for a few minutes before you begin to *feel it*. And patients feel this too -- the most discriminating ones often decide to find another practice that is more focused and more passionate about their work. Here is another result, when the dentist tries to sell his practice, he learns not many buyers want to purchase a stagnant practice, the equity has been all used up and growth is far too expensive to invest additional dollars in!

So what is the way out? Good question...of course it begins with taking action. It also requires taking personal responsibility for the practice and all that is included in running it. That means the dentist has to be interested-in and accountable-for the leadership, management and service-end of the practice.

This requires a huge change in thinking and a committed effort on doing. And, quite frankly, this can be a large challenge for many dentists. In fact, a recent podcast on the topic of good intentions and a lack of follow-thru was released in July. Unfortunately, most doctors I've met perceive the pain of making the change to be worse than staying the same and accepting mediocre results. However, by opening ourselves up to change, we give our practice, our patients and our teammates the opportunity to get the most from our talents.

According to Gerber, the problem isn't the practice, the staff, or the patients, the problem is the dentist and until they can change their perspective on how a successful practice operates, until they realize that their practice is both an ART and a SCIENCE and that they need a process, a structure and a model to benchmark against, they will likely be stuck. The good news is that you already have the practice...all you have to do is improve both your leadership and management skills, both of which are teachable.

To do that, it requires unbridled passion and an unyielding commitment for a transformation to take place. It requires learning new skills, gaining new knowledge, raising your standards and looking at your practice – and yourself – very differently than you ever have before. It means adopting a business model that will satisfy the leader, the manager and the technician all at the same time.

Dentists must learn to adapt their practice so it becomes “systems-driven” rather than “people-driven.” Starbucks and McDonalds are successful because they are systems-dependent and not people-dependent. Their systems run the business and the people run the systems. A reliable system is one where if your front office person had to take six months off because of an illness, any replacement could easily and exactly perform the work without any major training. According to Gerber, the systems become the tools your team uses to increase their productivity and to get the job done in order for your practice to successfully differentiate itself from your competition.

What are some signs that a practice lacks the necessary systems? Well, there may be large swings in monthly production and collections, you are seeing far too many appointment cancellations; the practice focuses on petty things rather than working on major issues; everyone seems to be heading in their own direction, chaos and stress is felt by everyone including the patients – these are just some examples.

What types of systems are we talking about? Scheduling, Treatment Planning, your New Patient Process, how you manage Recall, your focus on Patient Retention are just a few examples. If you're not sure where to start, answer this question with as much honesty as you can muster, ***"What is standing in the way of your patients getting what they want?"*** What do you need to be doing, or not doing, in order for you to meet your patient's expectations? And what are those expectations...do you know? Here are some other questions to ask yourself:

1. What result are you trying to produce for your patients? Really be specific...not the standard, " we want to help our patients get healthy" kinda of response
2. Are you producing that result every single time? Be honest here
3. If not, why not?
4. If you are, how can you produce an even better result?
5. Do you lack systems to create these results? If so, what would those systems look like?
6. If you have systems in place, are you using them? And do you need to change them?

After working with so many dental practices, I know that a dentist can be much more than what most become. I also know that nothing is preventing you from making your practice all that it can be. It takes desire and commitment for sure, and it also requires that, as the owner, you must learn how to develop your leadership and manager roles so that they are "in-balance" with your clinical role. Playing tug-of-war with your practice, with your life, shouldn't be left to chance...take the action required to master the skills needed to become a successful practice. Most dentist's live in a state of resignation – they resign themselves to live with what they have rather than commit to what they want. When you do that you "numb-out" part of your awareness becoming deadened and, well, numb. A lot of dentists are walking around half-dead even though they are only 40 years old wondering why their practice is operating at 50% of its potential. In order to breakthrough and realize your full potential, you need to think about how a practice **REALLY** works as opposed to the way you have come to **BELIEVE** how it works

I urge you to assess your "balance" of the different levels of work and stop playing a three way tug-of-war with your practice. Make the necessary changes to create the practice of your dreams. You will be happy you did and so will your patients and your team.

Have a great month wherever you are and whatever you are doing.

This is Art Deden signing off! Continued Success to you and your team