

# Let the Learning Begin

How to  
use your

first years  
in practice

to become  
a skilled  
leader



**M**any new dental graduates aren't ready to set up a practice, but instead are likely to spend some time gaining experience and working as associates. I'd like to discuss how to put this time to its best use, as an ideal opportunity to begin preparing yourself for many of the business, management and especially human resources skills you'll need if your goal is to eventually open a practice.

To that end, I'd like to share a lesson I learned from a mentor early on during my trek toward becoming a business owner. Then, I'll add something that I hope will make a huge difference in your journey toward becoming a practice owner. The first lesson is about educating yourself; the second is, well, about educating yourself. (Sorry, it never ends.)

## Get 'paid to learn' with someone else's money

When I was 22, a successful businessman took a couple of hours to answer my questions about how to become a good business owner. He told me to identify what it is I thought I wanted to do, and then to get a job doing it. "Work your way into the good graces of the owner of the company," he said, "and learn everything you can from him or her while you are there." Pretty straightforward so far, but there's a point: He referred to this as getting paid to learn—and even to make mistakes—with another person's money. (This should sound an awful lot like an associateship to you.)

My long-ago mentor went on: "In the best of circumstances, you may even be able to show that you are curious enough and care enough about the place you work to become a part of the team that manages the business. At that point, the lessons you

can learn about yourself, employees, profits, advertising and marketing are practically limitless."

He also pointed out, "Hell, the place doesn't even have to be run well for you to learn a ton of things from your experience! Go in and give it your all." Over the years, I can personally confirm that the last part is true. And I'll confess that as I was first starting out, sometimes the "place that was not run so well" but served as a learning experience was even my own business!

Every experience is an opportunity to learn, and hopefully to grow. Doing it under other people's tutelage and being allowed to make a few mistakes with someone else's business is an honor. Cherish it, and don't waste any opportunity to learn and grow from it.

## Try to learn the basics of business before you open your own practice

As a new grad, even though you're not yet in charge of a team, you'll benefit from making "learning about running a business" an intentional focus immediately. Dental school may be over but your education as a future business owner is just beginning. This is a time for not just applying all your new dental skills in the real world, but also for building up your leadership, business management and HR skills.

Consciously focusing on these areas while still an associate—especially with the knowledge and ideally even the mentorship of the practice owner—makes the acquisition of basic HR and leadership skills much faster and safer. If practice owners are willing and enthusiastic, you may even be able to try out some of your ideas and skills on their time and dime—the ideal training ground.

by Paul Edwards



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I wish that as you open your practice, you arrive at that opportunity with planning already in place for enrolling employees into your vision, and with the energized and informed momentum to become a true leader. With practice and intention, you are less likely to make major mistakes or to be crisis-focused when it comes time for you to make great leadership decisions. It's the difference between having your first new practice run you and you running the practice.

Once you decide you want to own a practice, you'll need to transform yourself into a manager of the business and its systems, finances and employees. Practicing will be over as soon as you begin risking your own income and investment; a new level of responsibility and sense of reality will set in as you realize that your employees are counting on you to understand and get everything right. HR—employees, management, best practices and compliance—will be one of your top concerns. You'll also need to learn

about marketing and branding. You need to become a salesperson. Trust me, *everyone* is in sales.

## You're already a dentist—now you must be a leader

At the top of the very challenging list of things it takes to be a good boss is figuring out how to be a great leader. It'll take a lot of work, but trust me. Another thing school does not prepare you for is the incredible feeling of satisfaction and professional fulfillment that becoming a leader of other professionals brings into your life.

The word *leader* implies that you have people who follow you. So again I circle back to the critical skill of HR management. Remember, HR stands for “*human resources*”—humans who are counting on you, and whom you count on to help you carry out the work of your practice. Your entire support system and business success hinges on these people.

I've learned that if you can find a way to attract and inspire great employees, 99 percent of your success will require 99 percent less effort. And guess what? You're in luck, because great people also need places to work that allow them to do great things. Great teams require systems that support them and help them accomplish the vision of the practice. Learning how to have those systems ready, and how to find and lead those people, is a process that you'll want to begin sooner rather than later.

There are many paths one can take to get there, and a wide variety of available resources. I hope this article inspires you to learn more about strategic HR planning and the art of leadership. As Warren Bennis, leadership scholar said, “Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.”

It's amazing making your visions come true! And I recommend you start learning now. ■