

# VISION QUEST

The art of empowering employees through purpose and process



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After a 2013 fire made him rethink his purpose, Dr. Chris Griffin began a mission to help dentists compete in an ever-changing landscape, avoid burnout and enjoy practice again. His strategic systems, including the Silicon Valley Bonus System, enable practice breakthroughs and lessen the burdens that cause stress through an easygoing leadership process that energizes teams and takes pressure off the



doctor. Teaching other dentists how they can be more effective as leaders and inspire staff excellence without feeling the stress of micromanagement is a true passion for Griffin and is the driving force of his message. Email: [drchrisgriffin@gmail.com](mailto:drchrisgriffin@gmail.com)

## Course description

Increased competition is forcing dentists to operate outside of their comfort zones. While most are not equipped to become CEOs in the truest sense of the word, utilizing a solid leadership system that empowers the dental team to take ownership of practice growth allows owner-doctors to provide more of a low-key leadership role and still convey their vision for the practice.

## Abstract

Don't believe the lie that you must work more or become a tyrant to achieve success. You already have everything you need; the challenge is getting rid of the things you don't. Unlock the potential of a stress-free, laid-back style of leadership that empowers your team and restores balance through a fresh perspective and strategic approach. Take control and enjoy practice again.

Your team needs three things to allow your ideal practice to materialize:

1. They need to know the vision of the doctor. This becomes a signpost that continually keeps the practice growing in the right direction.
2. They need a vehicle. You must create a system that allows the proper environment and culture to thrive inside your practice.
3. Finally, they need validation. This is the continual reminder that they have achieved your objectives and a reward for a job well done.

These "three V's" are the backbone of every great dental practice today.

## Educational objectives

After reading the article, the participant should be able to:

1. Initiate a leadership strategy that inspires action while reducing stress.
2. Utilize the VISION process that equips staff to achieve like never before.
3. Understand their options as they pertain to the continued growth of corporate dentistry in our profession.
4. Begin organizing and tracking the tasks needed to implement new ideas and procedures into the practice.
5. Understand the philosophy behind the new incentive system for dental team members described in the article.

### Disclosure:

The author declares that in the past 12 months he has had a financial interest, arrangement or affiliation within the fields of dentistry or health care with Dental Capacity Academy and Premier Dental, and consulting in the subject that this CE course is on.



## Introduction

Dentists don't make good CEOs.

If a building were burning down and people were trapped inside, a CEO would talk to the crowd, find people with the right skill sets to help, form a rescue squad, develop a rock-solid escape plan, then send that team into the building.

Most dentists in that situation would rather rush headlong into the building to try to save as many people as possible. It's just who we are. We are more heroes than executives.

That's why the current climate of the dental profession is so dangerous for us. The exponential growth of corporate dentistry and group practice is putting pressure on dentists to try to become something they aren't—CEOs.

Consumed by the daily demands of our practice and family, it's hard to imagine trying to learn all the different skills that would be required to compete head to head against a large organization.

Some dentists have chosen to try to compete. Others have decided to close their eyes and continue their current path, hoping for the best. And still others have decided to get out of the profession altogether.

The solution is not running away from our life's work. The solution is going against our heroic instincts to put all the burdens on our shoulders and instead becoming real leaders by empowering the people around us. Doing this creates a practice that delivers both success and balance.

Leadership styles vary from dentist to dentist; there is no "magic bullet" leadership style that fits every practice. But I believe a few principles mesh very nicely with the personalities of most dentists and yield consistently good results.

It's time to take a step back to give our leadership strategy a fresh perspective and a strategic approach, and to develop clear objectives that will allow us to take control and enjoy practice again.

## Discovering what I didn't want

Ten years ago, I could see that the landscape of our profession was changing and moving toward a more corporate setting. I wanted to get in on the front end of that industry, so I took two of my best dental friends who were also interested in forming a dental corporation on a trip to visit a dentist who owned 32 practices.

It was an eye-opening visit, for sure. The organization was amazing: From the central scheduling center to the large meeting spaces, this was the closest resemblance to a corporate setting I had ever seen for a dental practice company. The owner was a friendly guy who was very proud of what he had accomplished—and for good reason! It was amazing.

However, when I had the opportunity to ask him some candid questions, I quickly realized that I just wasn't cut out to do what he was doing.

It wasn't that it required superhuman intelligence to run those multiple practices; the owner was very intelligent, but that wasn't it. His sacrifice of personal time was the dream-killer for me.

He asked me, "Do you have any hobbies?" That was an innocent enough question and I answered honestly, "Of course. I love to fish and golf."

His reply drove a dagger through the heart of my future dental empire. He said: "I don't have any hobbies. My hobby is poring over reports and data every weekend. My hobby is having meetings after hours and developing new strategies to try to keep our company competitive. My hobby is this company."

It was like all the air was sucked out of the building. I'm sure that the look on my face made him realize that I, like so many other dentists, wouldn't be jumping into the multiple practice arena because I would never be willing to give up my free time to the degree necessary to compete in that world. My friends agreed.

The ride home was a quiet one as we contemplated how we could tackle the challenge of wanting to become as successful as possible, while preserving our autonomy and time off.



## Rebuilding from the ashes, like a phoenix

Over the next few years, there were many successes (and some failures) as I pursued the best way to practice in a way that allowed me to meet those goals. Even when successes were great, there was a fatal flaw in my strategy to which I was blind until just recently.

Being a typical dentist, I had always relied far too much on my ability to drive the practice by force of sheer will. Many times, I would become a task master who'd become frustrated when my team didn't do a good enough job of reading my mind or remembering the instructions I had given them perfectly. It's obvious to me why burnout is so prevalent in our profession.

It's too simple to try to take on all the problems of the practice by yourself because you think that you can do everything better than anyone else on your team. The rub is that, technically, we're probably right—we can handle each individual problem that arises better than our employees ... but whose fault is that?

It's our own fault if we haven't created an environment where our team can succeed and take those burdens off our shoulders.

Then, a life-altering event changed the way that I practiced and gave me the opportunity to discover a new way that finally allowed me to achieve my ideal practice.

In 2013, a fire destroyed my dental office.

Over the next year as I tried to rebuild, I also lost nearly 100 years of accumulated dental experience as longtime employees left the practice. I can't say that I blame them. Adding the massive challenges of dealing with insurance companies and new construction to my already overstressed state had robbed me of the enthusiasm that had driven the practice for 15 years.

I was incapable of being the central driving force anymore. The fire that had destroyed my physical office was now threatening to destroy my entire dental practice.

Luckily, I realized that things had to change if I was going to be able to rebuild and recover. So I developed an axiom for our practice that eventually saved us, and I think it would also benefit (if not save) any practice

that decided to live by it as well.

- Develop a vision for your practice that empowers your team to achieve like never before.
- Practice smarter to enhance your purpose, your process and your people.

I needed a smarter vision for my practice, and I'd be willing to be that you do, too. Once we had that figured out, the changes we needed to make became obvious.

It also helped me to change my leadership style from a "one-man show" type of leader to a more laid-back or low-key leader who lets the team handle most of the daily tasks that were weighing me down.

## Defining and implementing your VISION

That's when I discovered the three V's: *vision, vehicle* and *validation*.

When I applied them to my practice vision, it was like throwing gasoline onto a fire. Team motivation and camaraderie shot off the charts and I knew I had found the secret to creating a dental team that really could take ownership of the practice.

To implement the 3V strategy into your own practice, start by sitting down with your team to develop a shared *vision*. If you're going to ask them to make your life better by removing the bulk of your management burdens, they need to have an active voice in defining that practice vision.

I suggest calling a lunch meeting—maybe even make it an hour and a half, because this could be the most important 1½ hours of planning you ever tackle. During that meeting, follow this six-step process:

1. **Vision.** Define your practice vision by asking your team what kind of workday would be their idea of the most amazing practice day possible. Don't limit their imagination at this point by throwing up artificial barriers. If they say that they'd like to see only clear braces patients and have daily two-hour lunches, allow that train of thought to move forward even if you think it's out of the realm of realistic possibility. Once

everyone has had a chance to input their idea of a perfect day, you can share your ideas of what a perfect day looks like to you.

2. **Intercommunication.** Next, almost in the same way that Congress goes to committee to hammer out a final bill between the House and Senate, you need to facilitate intercommunication. Discuss what is and is not feasible at that exact juncture. You may very well discover that your team will become extremely more motivated when they're allowed a voice in the overall direction of the practice, and that could make your job much easier. At the end of the intercommunication session, you should have a first draft of your practice vision complete.
3. **Strategies.** Next, you need to begin the process of defining and developing strategies that will lead to the systems that make your shared vision come true. You should leave this meeting with everyone on the same page and receptive to the changes that you're about to install to make everyone's lives better in the long run.
4. **Implementation.** After you and your leadership team have gotten the basic two or three beginning systems in the blueprint phase that you'd like to see become status quo in the practice, implement them. That's sometimes considered a dirty word in dentistry, because dentists know how hard it is to change. (That applies not only to the team but also to the dentists.) But movement toward our goals isn't possible without that change, so implementation is the key. I like to have a quick meeting with my practice leadership team, whether it be a single office manager or multiple team leaders, and get everyone on the same page as to the exact steps needed to make our vision in each area happen. Then I usually let my team leaders do the implementation. (Of course, I like to be there whenever questions arise, so we can

keep revising our systems blueprint to continue moving in the right direction.)

5. **Organization.** Once our systems are running smoothly—whether that takes a couple of weeks or a couple of months—we memorialize our organization by writing down all the steps and systems it took to create that new environment. I like to keep a hard copy of all our systems in a three-ring binder, but you can also do this on a computer. No matter which you use, be sure to have backups! As I learned in my fire, some things can never be recovered if lost, and you certainly don't want to lose a book of the systems that are helping you realize your dream practice. This book is an amazing resource for review and for new hires. Once systems are written down, you can always revisit and revise them. This is more of a living document than a permanent set of office commandments.
6. **Nonstop pursuit.** Continually repeat this process. What I refer to as “nonstop pursuit” is the last piece of the puzzle, because you should never stop pursuing your goals or your dreams. Plus, if your team helped create the vision of your practice and you're all pursuing that goal together, it increases the chance that they will feel ownership of the new vision exponentially.

### Identifying the agents of change

The VISION process outlined above makes sure everyone knows the direction in which they need to drive the practice, but they still will need a *vehicle* that provides them motivation on a daily or weekly basis. Creating an environment of success is part of that, but you also need specific tools to help create the new environment. The success vehicle in our practice is our “breakthrough board,” a centrally located board that tracks all the ongoing projects that are going on in the practice at any given time.

All those systems and blueprints that you created

in the VISION process can and should be broken up into bite-sized tasks. In my office, we take one hour per week away from treating patients to work on our breakthrough board. My leadership team and I are always listing new tasks that need to be accomplished in the practice. For example, if we're going to design a new marketing campaign to target students at our local college, we would need someone to figure out a good offer that might attract those students; someone to draw a mockup of a marketing piece; someone to work with a printer to get the marketing brochure, flyer or postcard printed to our specs; and someone to deliver the pieces to the prospective new patients in whatever way we choose. Those are four distinct tasks that can be placed on that board and can be worked during that weekly hour by any members on our team who would like to choose them.

The beauty of this system is that all our team members can pick and choose whichever tasks appeal to them during this weekly hour. When they picked the task it became something they now own, and that makes all the difference in their effort levels and motivation.

### Rewarding a job well done

Finally, they need *validation*—they need to feel like their efforts in the practice are being recognized. Our validation piece is a bonus system developed after studying how some of the most successful companies in Silicon Valley managed and rewarded their teams as they grew into giants of the industry. To some degree, these companies still use boards, just like the breakthrough board I described. In our case, we attach a dollar value to each of the bite-sized tasks placed on the board. Then, when the team members comes together for their “bonus hour” each week, as they're working to make the practice stronger and moving toward the shared vision, they're also earning bonus money.

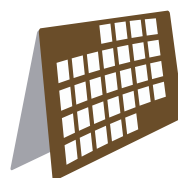
I know bonuses have a checkered past in our profession, and I am not a proponent of overtly money-based bonuses that can sometimes create all kinds of trouble

for your practice if they are not closely monitored. These bonuses are one-time payments that reward your team for a job well done on a particular task. You can be very conservative or very generous with your payouts, but as you pay team members actual checks for their efforts to make the practice better, you're validating them as valuable members of your team. This will pay dividends that will take you to your ultimate goal much faster and will probably create a much better environment along the way.

### Conclusion

If you implement the “3V's” in your practice, you will be turning over some of the office leadership to your team. I know that turning over some of your practice responsibilities feels strange; it's in your nature to be the hero, it's in your nature to be the driver. That's what has made you successful so far. I would just ask you to consider how great it would feel to still be the hero to your patients, but not have to carry around all the worries and concerns of day-to-day practice operations.

If you can manage that, you can make your dental practice stronger than you ever imagined—fireproof, even. ■



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1. **In the opinion of Dr. Griffin, dentists usually make wonderful CEOs.**
  - A. True.
  - B. False.
2. **The rise of corporate dentistry has led dentists to respond in which ways?**
  - A. Compete with the corporations.
  - B. Continue their current practice path and hope for the best.
  - C. Leave the profession of dentistry.
  - D. All of the above.
3. **Which of the following hobbies were not recommended to Dr. Griffin for dentists who wish to own multiple practices?**
  - A. Poring over reports and data from the practices.
  - B. Having meetings after hours.
  - C. Golfing.
  - D. Anything to help grow the dental company.
4. **It is the fault of the dentist if we haven't created an environment where our team can succeed and take those burdens off our shoulders.**
  - A. True.
  - B. False.
5. **"Practicing smarter" to Dr. Griffin means enhancing:**
  - A. Purpose.
  - B. Process.
  - C. People.
  - D. All of the above.
6. **Which of the following is *not* one of the "three V's" of Dr. Griffin's "Low-Key Leadership Method"?**
  - A. Vision.
  - B. Virtue.
  - C. Vehicle.
  - D. Validation.
7. **Which of the following is *not* included in Dr. Griffin's six-step VISION process?**
  - A. Strategies.
  - B. Implementation.
  - C. Bonus Money.
  - D. Organization.
8. **In Dr. Griffin's practice, which members of the dental team usually do most of the implementation of new ideas and processes?**
  - A. Office managers.
  - B. Team leaders.
  - C. Doctors.
  - D. Hygienists.
9. **Dr. Griffin recommends every practice keep track of projects and tasks with which of the following?**
  - A. Software programs.
  - B. Notebooks.
  - C. Memory of the doctor.
  - D. A "breakthrough board."
10. **Where did Dr. Griffin's new bonus system originate?**
  - A. Mississippi.
  - B. New York.
  - C. Arizona.
  - D. Silicon Valley.

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## VISION Quest

by Dr. Chris Griffin

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| 6.  | A | B | C | D |
| 7.  | A | B | C | D |
| 8.  | A | B | C | D |
| 9.  | A | B | C | D |
| 10. | A | B | C | D |

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