



How to Lead When You Are Not in Authority

By **Carol A. Jahn, RDH, MS**

You have heard the words before. Perhaps you have even uttered them yourself. And they always generate a gut-tightening emotion. What are these disempowering words? *My dentist won't let me.*

How debilitating these words can be; not just for you as a dental hygienist but for your employer-dentist and the practice, too. Perhaps they make you feel angry and resentful. Some may feel safe and protected from an ever-changing world. Either way, growth is restrained, and everyone including patients suffers.

It is tempting to believe that there is nothing to be done; that the dentist isn't going to change. And that is somewhat true. Your dentist likely will not change overnight; but that doesn't mean there is nothing that you can do to alter the situation. There is no one you have greater influence over than yourself. Whether you are an introvert or extrovert, you can learn some simple skills that positively impact your work life and well-being. You can learn to lead.

Me, Lead? I'm Not the One in Charge!

When many of us think of leaders, we naturally conjure up visions of larger-than-life people like Oprah Winfrey or Barack Obama. Their charisma and presence evoke 'natural born leader.' In reality, few are born with natural leadership abilities, yet almost all of us are capable of learning some skills to make us effective everyday leaders in our work and home life. In other words, you can learn to lead.

Another commonly held view of leadership is that it is positional. In dental practices, the dentist is viewed as the leader. What most do not realize is that everyone in a practice can be a leader. Leadership at all levels drives collaboration rather than conflict. When leadership is present in all facets of an organization, trust and cooperation are higher. People are more likely to support one another and the greater good of the practice.

You do not have to be the smartest, most creative, most eloquent or even the most dominant to lead. Research has found that, over time, the four qualities that people look for in leaders are:¹

- Honesty
- Forward looking
- Competence
- Inspiration

Dental hygienists often find they already possess these qualities in their daily interactions with patients. Consider that you are *honest* with your patients about their oral health. You paint for them a *vision* of what their oral health could be like with greater effort. You are *competent* in your dental hygiene skills. You try to *inspire* them to achieve a greater level of oral hygiene. These qualities give you credibility. And leaders must be credible.

When you have credibility, you have the foundation for leadership. Kouzes and Posner, leading experts in the field of leadership development, have uncovered what they consider the five best practices of exemplary leadership. They are:¹

- Modeling the way
- Inspiring a shared vision
- Challenging the process
- Enabling others to act
- Encouraging the heart.

Kouzes and Posner have found that these simple yet profound practices have stood the test of time and are as relevant today as they were 25 years ago. More importantly, they also learned that everyone can develop some skills and competencies around them.¹

Model the Way

At its most basic, modeling the way is about setting an example, a key component of which is the ability to show that your actions are in line with your values. Values are the guideposts for modeling the way, and how we express and act on them demonstrates the direction of our moral compass. Values empower and motivate by helping us stay focused and in control of the things that matter most.¹ This means that in order to model the way effectively, you must first find your voice and be able to clearly and consistently communicate your values and beliefs.

Credibility is established when actions are aligned with values. Simplistically, it is showing people that you do what you say you will. The alignment of our actions with our values is often demonstrated in three ways: how we spend our time, how we react to stress and the stories we share with each other.¹

As dental hygienists, how we spend time is reflected in the way we use appointment time with patients. If we talk to our patients about the oral systemic link (values) do we

make time to take blood pressure or recommend smoking cessation (action)? Within the dental practice, critical incidents usually take the form of late patients, absent coworkers or anything that can send the schedule into chaos. How we react to this pressure tells everyone about our values. For example, are we able to still give 100 percent to each patient, regardless of our frustration? What about the stories we tell to our coworkers and our patients? Do we choose words that suggest we think highly of each other and the practice, or do we send out innuendoes that might reflect poorly on others and the office?

How can learning to model the way impact *"my dentist won't let me?"* When you are clear about why you want to make a change either in a product or a procedure, and you tie that change to the values you hold for your patients and the practice, you have the potential to open up dialogue that moves beyond a simple "no." It can help you determine if there is a conflict between your values and those of the practice. Don't be afraid to ask questions. It will demonstrate your willingness to understand the other point of view as well as your seriousness about the change.

Inspire a Shared Vision

Many people find the practice of inspiring a shared vision the most challenging. Overall, people—even CEOs—often find it hard to feel inspiring.¹ Yet having a dream or vision of the future is inherent in almost all of us. Before you can inspire a shared vision in others, you must be able to envision the future. How can you tap into your vision? The best place to start is with the things you are passionate about. When you talk to someone about the aspects of your work or personal life that are the most meaningful, take a minute to recognize the enthusiasm and conviction you have. It can also be helpful to reflect on the past. What dreams or aspirations have influenced where you are today? Think about what is possible and how it can create a future vision for you.

When we speak from the heart about our passions, our enthusiasm and excitement spreads to others. It can be a powerful portal of entry into discovering the hopes, dreams and common aspirations of others. Data have shown that even when people have separate, yet related purposes, they are able to work together to raise each other to a higher level of motivation and morality. To discover our mutual purposes, getting to know our coworkers and actively listening to their points of view are critical pieces in finding a shared vision.¹

As dental hygienists, we can often become segregated from other members of the dental team because of our work schedules. Even though lunches can sometimes be abbreviated or staggered, it is important to make time to have lunch (in or out of the office) at least once a week with your coworkers. It can help you gain a better understanding of the challenges and issues facing other segments of the practice.

How can learning to inspire a shared vision impact *"my dentist won't let me?"* First, when you develop the skill of envisioning the future, you can extend that to how the product or therapy that you wish to integrate in to the practice fits or helps meet what you envision as best for your patients. Second, if you can effectively share your vision with your coworkers, you have the potential for enlisting their help. The reality is that some people have difficulty with change, even if it is for the

best. This may or may not be the issue with the dentist, but developing critical mass with your coworkers can sometimes provide the leverage needed to tip the balance towards change.

Challenge the Process

The practice of challenging the process is an art. It is not about complaining about what isn't right but rather about considering *what might be*.¹ It's also important to keep in mind that it is the process that you challenge and not a person or people. How can you challenge the process in your work setting? Dental offices by nature need routine procedures and protocol to insure that all patients receive the highest standard of care. When you get comfortable with the way things are done, it can be easy to overlook new scientific discoveries and product innovations that may obsolete current practices. One of the best ways to seek out new opportunities is by attending professional meetings. They provide the mechanism for both learning about new information via continuing education courses and networking with colleagues.

Changing the way we do things is a risk, so it can feel stressful. That is why it is okay to start with small steps or experiment a little.¹ The change should not involve anything that would put a patient at risk. At the same time, it is important to not let fear override taking any risk, especially when a new treatment or therapy might provide a greater patient benefit.

As dental hygienists, one way we can challenge the process is by learning to let go of the need to have every patient learn to floss. Today, there are many scientifically proven effective alternatives to dental floss that are also patient-preferred. Because so few people actually use floss, this makes the risk low and the potential benefit high.

How can learning to challenge the process impact *"my dentist won't let me?"* If your dentist-employer has a hard time with change, you may want to ask about 'trying out' the product first before converting. This is obviously easier with self-care or prophylaxis-type products than larger-scale items. A couple of things that might prove helpful are 1) if possible, purchase or get a sample of the product so that you and your employer can try it yourselves. Second, you might negotiate to recommend it for a couple of patients first. You will want to set up a protocol to evaluate it as well; otherwise, you won't have the data to help make your case for change.

Enable Others to Act

Trust is the foundation for the practice of enabling others to act. For people to want to work collaboratively, they must trust each other. What is one of the best ways to build trust with your coworkers? Be the one to trust first. What does this look like? It can mean asking people for their opinion on things and not just listening to their answer but acting on their advice. It involves being transparent by openly sharing information, including admitting your own mistakes. It is a willingness to ask for and accept help when needed. It is treating everyone with dignity and respect.¹

Trust fosters collaboration, and working collaboratively strengthens everyone. When people have the opportunity to try new things, they can develop new competencies. And feel-

ing more competent makes people feel more confident. Trust and confidence are empowering; when people feel empowered, they are more likely to strive to excel.¹

In dental practices, competition between the 'front' and 'back' staff can lead to distrust. How can dental hygienists help play a role in repairing these relationships? One way might be to help everyone learn more about each other's jobs. For example, if scheduling is a source of tension, you might ask that the schedule coordinator accompany you to a continuing education course on treating periodontal patients. You might ask to attend a practice management course with the front office staff.

How can learning to enabling others to act impact "*my dentist won't let me?*" One of the reasons people sometimes feel reluctant to change is lack of confidence. They may not fully understand how to use the product or do the procedure, or exactly what it can do. One of the ways you can help enable your employer to act is by sharing all the data and knowledge that you have on the product including research and educational materials. You might ask your employer to visit the company that makes the product, either virtually via their Web site or physically at a tradeshow. This moves both of you from a point of permission to collaboration.

Encouraging the Heart

The practice of encouraging the heart involves recognition and celebration.¹ Every person needs recognition. It shows them that you are paying attention to the positive contribution that they make. Recognizing your coworkers, including your employer, can range from simply remembering to say thank you verbally or with a card to taking someone out to lunch to recognize an above-and-beyond effort. Staff meetings are another occasion to recognize your colleagues. The most important thing about recognition isn't the amount you spend, but rather that the person feels that it is heartfelt.

In addition to recognizing employees, it is important to recognize and celebrate when the office reaches goals or other milestones. Taking the time to celebrate together not only pays tribute to the goal and the effort it took to get there, but it can develop camaraderie and cohesiveness within the team.¹ Providing dental care and working with patients daily can be hard, but it shouldn't be boring. It is important to remember to also have some fun.

Dental hygienists play the part of motivator and cheerleader with patients. That role can easily be extended to coworkers. One of the best ways to do this is by simply being a friend to the people you work with. In the past, leaders and managers were coached to keep a distance from their associates. Newer research shows that when people who work together are friends, they complete more projects and are more effective.¹

How can learning to encourage the heart impact "*my dentist won't let me?*" When we take the steps to encourage the heart, we also send the message that we both give the best and expect the best. It is important to recognize our employer as well as our coworkers. When we take responsibility for creating positive expectation, we lay the groundwork for positive results.

Conclusion

Leadership can be learned. You do not have to be the owner or a dentist in the practice to be a leader. Mastery of leadership practices will evolve over time and with experience. You only have to believe in yourself and love what you do.

Reference

1. Kouzes J, Posner B. The leadership challenge, 3rd ed. San Francisco: Jossey Bass; 2003.

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