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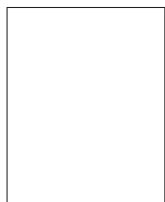
# Free Your Practice

*“Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.” – Henry David Thoreau.*

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**D**o changes in our lives really happen randomly as chaotic events, or is change more predictable? Did you one day go to work to find your patients suddenly saying yes to comprehensive treatment? Or, have you had the experience of multiple broken appointments and your collections suddenly down? We often think of change as being sudden. Somehow, our senses fool us, and life catches us off guard, so we think that the change we see is rapid. In each of these cases, there is usually some event we can point to that was an indicator of the change we witnessed. These events preceding change are known as the “seeds of change.”

What happens when change invades our lives and makes us uncomfortable and unsure of ourselves? Take the example of a self-motivated and efficient office manager, dedicated to the practice, responsible for scheduling, finan-



cial, and payroll. The average dentist will come to rely heavily on such a treasure, relishing the opportunity to focus solely on dentistry. Patients love her, and she loves her job. The practice flourishes, and she helps bring in seven figure productions and collections over consecutive years. More importantly, she understands and buys into the concept of providing excellence to patients and building relationships. But suddenly, after years of superb service, it becomes clear something is wrong.

But, the realization that something is awry starts with just an inkling of an idea. Perhaps, you lose sleep, convinced some harm has come to her. Perhaps, there are office whispers about her. Often it can't be explained, but there is a palpable sense of something being off. Fear begins to build within the dentist, and he or she thinks, “What if something happens to her? Would I be all right? Would the practice survive?” The fear only increases as the problem worsens, changes are

felt in the office, and productivity drops. An unmanaged schedule results, creating missed appointments and patients appearing when they are not scheduled. Collections, once tightly reined in, begin to fall slack.

The dentist, often feeling he or she must be a friend to the failing employee, tells her how the practice depends on her, and how smart and valuable she is. This usually results in only temporary improvements. Finally, the situation can no longer be ignored, and a confrontation must occur.

Dental training does not prepare the dentist to face an employee and friend in this kind of situation, but the root cause must be identified or the practice will quickly sustain damage. Confronting the employee must be done gently but with persistence. And then it is revealed... Your front office manager admits she has been struggling with alcoholism for the last two years, although the dentist only perceived the problem to have been present the last three months.

Of course, every dentist will respond to this differently. I have experienced this situation, and in our case, I tried to get our office manager into treatment right away. She was not intoxicated at the time so the treatment center would not accept her. I gave her a week off with pay, and asked her to seek treatment, attend AA meetings, agree to alcohol testing, and face her peers in the office. Once she completed this, she would be wel-

comed back to our practice.

Unfortunately, high hopes are often dashed in these situations. I had every faith in our office manager, and I know she had good intentions, but in the end she was unable to follow through on these requirements. It is important to know that, despite your caring handling of the situation, it will not always work out as you would like. And if it does not, it's best to sever the relationship. You cannot allow one person's demons to drain your practice.

William Bridges writes in his book on transitions that all “transitions start with an ending and finish with a new beginning.” We all had to let go of our old identities and alliances in order to move forward. The fear I had felt was gone, replaced by a freedom and a newfound clarity.

By drawing on the values and visions you've made clear to yourself and your practice, you'll know how to do what must be done. The clarity and freedom I have found have not been without much personal reflection. We often feel things are out of our control. However, armed with the knowledge of who we are, we can gain much personal freedom and power. The strongest power is that of clarity of vision and purpose. Even change in its most disturbing and painful form must bend before that power.

And those deep fears about survival and confrontation fade as life – and the practice of dentistry – go on. You will survive even this and perhaps even be better for it. ■

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