

Empowering dentists to take control of their future

PRACTICE PLAN brought together three experts – Chris Barrow, Sarah Buxton and Ashley Latter – to find out how dental professionals can achieve success through self-empowerment....



CHRIS BARROW is a consultant, trainer and coach to the UK dental profession. He has spent more than 15 years witnessing first-hand the trials and tribulations faced by dentists today.



SARAH BUXTON is a director of FTA Law in Leeds and a solicitor acting exclusively for dentists, dental managers and dental practice owners in all aspects of HR and employment law.



ASHLEY LATTER has delivered over 23,000 hours of business coaching to the dental industry all over the world and, in his role as a consultant, is an expert at empowering dentists and their teams.

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PP: One of the key reasons we have brought together your expertise iwws to chat about the aspect of change. Change is inevitable, it's happening all around us, but nevertheless it can be difficult for some dental practice owners to make necessary changes when it comes to their business. What do you believe is holding them back, even when they are unhappy with the status quo?

Chris: I believe that it is a perceived lack of resources in three areas – time, money and people. Generally speaking, owners and managers spend too much time doing the wrong things and not enough time doing the right things. They also sometimes allocate their funds inappropriately, spending money on things that would be better supported by an expert.

Ashley: Together with Chris' thoughts, I feel that there are two elements, really: fear of the unknown and a lack of confidence. Most people would rather stay in their comfort zone and inadvertently have their business suffer than step outside and take a chance on doing something different.

Sarah: We know that many people are scared of change and, as a solicitor who has worked with many dental clients, I've seen that a significant part of this can involve the legalities of change. They can be worried about the possibility of things like employment tribunals, which can be expensive and time-consuming, as well as emotionally draining, so it is easy to see why that may be a stumbling block.

PP: So, having talked about how fear can affect the business, how can dental teams make change in a positive way?

Ashley: I think that the best way to implement change is to train and coach the team together; that can be very inspiring.

That's when you get massive change in a practice; when everyone sings from the same hymn sheet you get amazing results. It not only serves to overcome the inherent fear of change but also gets everyone motivated about any changes, allowing practices to take and maintain control.

Sarah: Ashley is right. For example, if a dental practice needed to change the length of the working day because the owner has identified that opening for longer hours can generate more income and therefore profit, not to embrace that change because they're worried about the rights of the employees can ultimately prevent business success. However, if it is effectively communicated to the staff why the hours need to change and how it would benefit the practice in the long run, that would go a long way to allaying any of the team's concerns. The truth is, most employees and associates want the practice to be successful; as long as they understand why, they will get on board with any changes.

Chris: I would add that I've seen that the turning point for many dental business owners is when they realise they can't do everything for themselves, and they've got to delegate to a talented management team or seek outside support. One member of that team would need to be what I describe as a clinical manager, and would be responsible for the day-to-day operation of the business as a healthcare clinic. A second manager would be a business manager, who would have their eye on the finances, the marketing and the customer journey. In my opinion, only then can the practice expand and succeed.

PP: Tying in with the idea that effective communication between everyone

working in the practice is key, what difference do you think a happy team makes in terms of business success?

Chris: It can make all the difference in the world! Taking myself as an example for a moment, I have recently celebrated my 46th year in work without a break, and I'm very pleased to be able to say that I absolutely love my job and I've got no intention whatsoever of thinking of retirement. Now think about the person who gets home from work, throws the bag at the wall, kicks the cat out of the way and says 'I need a drink'. We all go through similar phases and we know what they feel like, so that's how important happiness is.

Sarah: It's certainly not all about the money, although some practice owners provide annual pay rises and think that's enough to keep some employees happy. However, people go to work for lots of different reasons such as flexibility to have certain days off, or wanting to be trained to take on more responsibility. To ascertain what the team needs to feel happy, communication is, once again, key. Only when you know what each staff member wants to achieve professionally can you take appropriate action to help them achieve that, feel empowered and, ultimately, get the most out of the team for the benefit of the practice as a whole.

Ashley: A happy team is indeed vital. If people aren't happy they won't conform, they won't come to work early, they won't go the extra mile. They will go home at 5 o'clock, their attitude won't be great and they'll spoil the barrel, so to speak.

PP: And then looking a little farther afield, how do you perceive the team's relationship with their dental suppliers might make a difference to the success of a dental practice?

Ashley: This is an area that can be forgotten. You've got to have amazing relationships with suppliers, because they help you achieve your goals. I treat mine well and pay them on time, and I know I'm going to get world class customer service from them in return. If you want world class customer service, you've got to become a world class customer.

Chris: I agree – if you maintain a relationship with your suppliers that is as good as the relationship you maintain with your patients or, for that matter, family and friends, then it says something about who you are and the people you interact with will rise to your level.

Sarah: Also, if you make the time to get to know your local representatives you can ascertain which of them truly has the experience and the best set-up to support the goals of your business. Finding that perfect partnership makes such a difference to the day-to-day running of a practice and adds incredible peace of mind, often acting as the catalyst that allows the clinicians to focus on treatment without worrying unduly about what you might call the more peripheral aspects of patient care.

PP: Another issue that is often mentioned within the context of business success is marketing. In truth, how important do you believe marketing is to success?

Sarah: It is incredibly important but you have to get it right and, again, you may need to engage outside help to get the most from your marketing. I think a lot of people believe that marketing is having a pretty website, but it's about so much more if you're going to give it real power. It's about strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities within a business. Once you truly understand those, then you can set objectives for your business and put strategies in place that will help you work on your strengths or weaknesses.

Chris: And if we look at it from the coal face, here's the situation: 10-15 per cent of your patients drift away every year as a result of natural wastage. They die, they get married, they move out of the area, they pick another dentist, or they decide not to go to the dentist any more at all for a variety of reasons. Now imagine a bath full of water. What you've got at one end is a running tap and at the other end is a plughole that is permanently open. Marketing is the process by which you stop too much water running out of the bath – now that's empowering!

Ashley: So true! Most dentists learn how to perform dentistry very well but they don't learn how to sell or market their skills. But if you don't sell or market it you will have an ever-dwindling patient base and you'll be left twiddling your thumbs.

PP: Lastly, to round off everything we've been talking about, what is the single best piece of advice you can offer a dentist who wants to be more proactive in achieving success?

Ashley: I would suggest that, clinically speaking, dentists keep going on courses and learning new tricks, but at the same time learn the skills of marketing and communicating. Without those, you'll never fulfil your full potential or achieve great success. You've got to be proactive – if you don't embrace change and grow, your business dies.

Sarah: I would also offer that it is so important to take advice. There are a lot of people out there who can assist you, including lawyers and marketing experts, as well as business, HR, employment and finance consultants. Where you can, you should look to outsource and take advice from people who know what they're doing. Then you can focus on what you do best – the practice of dentistry – and feel secure your business is supported.

Chris: But also, don't forget yourself in the mix. The best piece of business advice I was ever given was to structure my working life so that I could take more holidays. As a result of taking that advice I have a life outside of my business that I thoroughly enjoy. Ultimately, that has made my professional and personal life a success. ■