



CORE VALUES and PRACTICE SUCCESS

by Marc B. Cooper, DDS, MSD

*We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.*

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

INTRODUCTION

What is the core of your practice? You are. How is your core expressed? It's expressed as values—core values, a direct expression of who you are. Without core values clearly and solidly at the heart of a dental practice, the practice is limited in its performance.

When core values exist as platitudes, neither honored nor upheld, the essence of the practice is weak and shallow¹. The practice lacks the necessary energy or chutzpa to effectively confront challenges and take authoritative actions. It is fundamental and critical for practice success that the dentist and staff respect and faithfully adhere to the core values.

WHAT ARE CORE VALUES?

In the business literature, there are 50 years and over 1,000 articles that address core values and their impact on business. They are clearly recognized as the bedrock of any successful business.

Ask yourself, "What are my core values?" The answer to this question is found through self-reflection and contemplation². You can't find these values outside of yourself. No consultant, advisor, book or blog can give you the answer. There are no "right" core values. They are at the heart of who you are, determining how you live your life. They shape your thinking and action, and your relationships. They provide a rigorous system of guiding principles and tenants that determine your philosophy of practice and of life. They are those values that you hold inviolate^{3, 4}.

REVEALING YOUR CORE VALUES

In our particular consulting method, we ask our clients first to complete our online value inventory⁵ which enables them to thoughtfully identify their core values. In a recent survey of 1,000 readers of our online newsletter from around the world, we asked readers to select their top five core values. They were invited to choose from a list we compiled from a number of sources.^{6, 7, 8} with two additions we considered fundamental and critical to dental practice: responsibility and excellence. The results of this survey follow:

1. Integrity (72%)
2. Excellence (39%)
3. Honesty (37%)
4. Compassion (30%)
5. Responsibility (29%)
6. Respect (26%)
7. Caring (26%)
8. Commitment (25%)
9. Service (23%)
10. Doing the Right Thing (21%)

These results universal, no matter what corner of the globe we surveyed. Integrity, excellence, honesty, compassion and responsibility consistently showed up in the top five spots.

Having consulted in other industries, including Fortune 100 companies, third parties, hospitals and hospital systems, and even Silicon Valley start-ups⁹, I have not seen these core values predominate as strongly or consistently as they did among dentists in private practice. Also, having consulted in many other countries, where individuals inherently absorb their society's values much in the same way they learn their language¹, values often differ inform one society to another. Yet, the core values of dentists were essentially the same regardless of nationality.

THE CORE VALUE TEST

Once our clients select their core values, we ask them to run their choices through a series of questions based on the work of Collins and Porras¹⁰. If a value makes it through, it's a core value.

Core Value Test:

1. If you were to start a new practice, would you build it around this core value *regardless* of the location or type of practice?
2. Would you want your practice to continue to stand for this core value 100 years into the future, no matter what changes occur in the outside world?
3. Would you want your practice to hold this core value, even if at some point it became a competitive *dis*advantage—even if in some instances the environment penalized the practice for living this core value?
4. Do you believe that those who do not share this core value—those who breach it consistently—simply do not belong in your practice?
5. Would you personally continue to hold this core value even if you were not rewarded for holding it?
6. Would you stop practicing before giving up this core value?
7. If you awoke tomorrow with more than enough money to retire comfortably for the rest of your life, would you continue to apply this core value to your productive activities?

If you did not answer "Yes" to all these questions, it is not a core value.

Our evidence supports the well-established assertion¹¹ that when dentists hold their core values as the foundation of their dental practice, owning and operating a practice is much less stressful and markedly more successful.

INSTALLING CORE VALUES INTO THE PRACTICE STRUCTURE

Core values are the most immediate and unfettered expression of who you are¹². Although dentists all might use the same words—integrity, excellence—their individual interpretations will sometimes differ, which makes their core values idiosyncratic.

Consider the example of one of our clients, a highly regarded, tenured general dentist and Kois mentor whose practice has a heavy emphasis on advanced restorative dentistry. These are the values that made it past the defining questions for this dentist: integrity, improvement, courage, service, respect, profit, excellence

Once they have been selected and passed the test, we ask each client to express his or her core values as beliefs. Since we realize that a single word like integrity or responsibility has different meanings for different people, having clients express their core values as beliefs enables them to more precisely define what they really mean.

Here are the fundamental beliefs as an expression of this client's core values.

- Integrity: We are honest. We do what we say we will do.
- Courage: We have the courage to do the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do.
- Respect: We treat our patients and each other the way we would like to be treated.
- Excellence: We strive for excellence in all we do. Good enough isn't good enough.
- Improvement: We strive to get better at what we do every day.
- Service: We are here to serve our patients at a level higher than they have ever experienced.
- Profit: It is absolutely necessary that we are profitable. Without profit, we can serve no one¹³.

Now, having articulated their core values and expressed them as beliefs, we ask our clients to present them to their staff members, to engage in a dialogue with them and to get their feedback and comments. We recommend that the dentist ask staff: "What does this particular value mean to you, to your job, the practice, the care of patients, to our team?" When people share the same core values, it generates affinity, kinship, trust and team³. When staff members do not share the same core values, there is commonly dissension, friction, and lack of relationship.

It is important to realize that only when core values are continuously reinforced do they exert ongoing influence. Core values gain power when expressed, and beliefs are a very effective way to continually communicate and reinforce them.

Once they have been identified, expressed as beliefs and been presented, discussed and mutually agreed upon with staff, we ask our clients to formulate their purpose and

mission, based on their core values. We also request they look closely at their employee policies and governing policies to assure that these values are infused in the structure of the practice and upheld. In essence, we ask our clients to build their entire business, leadership and management structures, directly on the foundation of their core values.

CONCLUSION

Our findings strongly support the assertion of many business experts: successful businesses stand with and inside their core values. In our client experience, dentists with successful practices rigorously and faithfully abide by their core values. They hold them in place by frequently speaking them as beliefs. Once the core values can be expressed as beliefs, these practices can extend and expand these beliefs to generate their purpose and mission.

Our observation of successful practices is that core values dominate and are a direct expression of who the dentist is. Our assertion is dentists can't build a successful practice with someone else's values or beliefs. That's why a consultant, advisor or coach can't give the dentist the "right" answers.

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13. With permission of Dr. Ron Wilkins, General Dentist, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2008.

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