



Creating hope in dark times! Success leaves clues

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We live in difficult times. You can look forward to 2009 with either **HOPE OR FEAR**. The coming year can be difficult, or it can be a year where you learn the most, grow the most personally and professionally, and prepare yourself to thrive. I like to say, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it’s faced.”

How will you approach the coming year? You have two fundamental choices. You can choose to do everything you can to survive through the impending recession, or you can remain inactive and join the 90% of people who complain and do little to take charge of their destiny.

There are external factors that we have little or no control over, and there are internal factors that we have tremendous control over. There is little satisfaction in fixing a weakness, but there is great satisfaction in developing your strengths. This attitude is elegantly and powerfully stated in the Serenity Prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

In reality, this prayer is the embodiment of a theory of *hope*. Work on the areas of your life and practice that offer positive outcomes, and let go of those aspects over which you have no control.

Positive investments

Having survived six recessions since I started my first practice and having guided my colleagues through five of those six, I recommend some simple but useful strategies for the upcoming year.

- Invest time in preparing your *positive mental attitude*. This isn’t hype. It is vital to your success. Get up every morning and spend at least 10 minutes focusing on everything for which you are grateful. Remember, you are the leader of your business and perhaps your family. People are looking to you, counting on you to show the way. I’m not saying this is easy, but it is a simple and powerful way to prepare you for the day, no matter what it brings.

- *Invest in yourself* to develop your God-given talents. If you’ve been in practice eight years or more, you already know how to deliver technical dentistry. But more than likely, you’re having difficulty getting it off the shelf. (This is NOT about running out to learn something more technical.)

- Make it an *organization issue* — how you deliver what you deliver and how you create a great experience for your patients in the process.

- Make it a *communication issue* — have a simple and effective process to communicate with your team and patients with care, compassion, and empathy to create hope and trust.

- Make it a *leadership issue* — You know where you want to go. You know your personal and practice strengths, and you focus on them and develop them every day.

How to be a leader

You are the leader of your life, your team, and your patients. Leaders do one major activity — they influence those who surround them. They influence them in positive, productive, performance-enhancing ways, or they do the opposite. A person cannot NOT communicate. When you own your own business, you cannot NOT influence those around you.

Leadership affects practice performance in big ways. Zenger and Folkman’s research reveals that ability directly affects the performance of a practice. Dentists who rated in the top 10% in leadership ability were 400% more successful (profitable) than those in the bottom 10%, and 45% more successful (profitable) than those in the middle 80%!

Zenger and Folkman’s research mirrors ours at the Schuster Center. We study the most healthy practices, determine why they are healthy, and then try to repeat those patterns.

Virginia Satir said, “All unhealthy families are unhealthy in different ways. All healthy families are healthy in similar ways.” We find the same is true in dental practices. We are all different. No two people are the same nor do we have exactly the same practices. There are, however, patterns in healthy practices that we see every day, and we try to instill these strategies and actions into all practices.

Here are five themes that we observe in the great practices that do well in any economic climate:

- They create meaningful relationships with their team and patients.

- They work to discover what their patients really need and want. They take the time to listen and create treatment plans that are in the best interest of their patients. In many cases, they routinely stage treatment relative to dental and economic circumstances.

- They constantly work to provide a high-trust culture for their teams and patients. The perspective of this high performing group of dentists is dramatically different than the other 90%. This group focuses first on the best interest of the patient, and secondly on themselves. The irony is that by truly living this spiritually humanistic strategy, by focusing on the best interests of patients first, this top 10% is two to four times more profitable than the next group.

- They have a highly organized practice, where patients are seen on time, treatment is delivered on time, and patients have a WOW experience.

- They strive to provide high quality dental care. This is not a perfection-centered group of dentists. They strive to provide their best dentistry but they don't obsess about it. They provide the best the patient can accept and pay with gratitude and appreciation and have a positive, grateful attitude with their patients. Their focus is on meeting and exceeding the needs of patients.

You have 100% control over these five areas. The most important activity you can do right now is focus on your relationships. Relationship is the process of investing in another person by doing those things for that person's own good without consideration of self reward. Ultimately, it is the sum of our responses to another human being.

The very fabric of your practice and your life is constructed person by person, patient by patient. As our positive relationships increase, we benefit geometrically — our practices become richer, and we expand our influence and build our strengths. Many think that leadership and relationship-building is soft. But observe any dentist who is really short on patients right now and I'll show you a dentist who is low on the relationship scale. *Relationships help define who we are, how we use our talents, what we become, and how we experience life. Every one of us can trace our successes to pivotal relationships in our lives.*

Your board of directors

The majority of us practice in rather small environments. We don't think we have a board of directors, but we do. Your best patients, the ones you really care about and who really care about you, are your *board of directors*. They are your advocates, your missionaries. They know you, believe in you, and cherish what you have done for them. These are the people you have influenced the most.

The most important key to growing any business in

an Internet-based economy, a culture under rapid change and transition, is to expand your *board of directors*. Mack Hannan, former sales manager for IBM, wrote, "There are three kinds of patients or clients:"

- **A** clients: The ones you are "growing" and who are "growing" you. They comprise 10% of the public.
- **B** clients: These are "growable" — the ones who have potential to "grow." They comprise 50% of the public.
- **C** clients: These are "ungrowable" — the ones with the lowest value for oral health. They don't care, don't show up, don't pay, and don't refer. They comprise 40% of the public.

We all have patients in every category. The key is your percentage in each category. Where is your focus? What are you doing to emphasize significant relationships with your A and B patients? I would suggest staying in personal contact with your A patients, your *board of directors*. Perhaps send newsletters or e-mails to your B patients. Spend any available time and energy thinking, innovating, sustaining, or building new relationships.

- Leadership is about relationships.
- Leaders have influence.
- Leadership and relationships are the No. 1 blocks to build on in order to survive and thrive in any economic climate.

It's all about the number of high quality relationships. To grow your practice, take a leadership position and expand your influence. Broaden your perspective. Stay positive. Take action every day to be grateful for what you have, while you focus on creating what you want, and 2009 will turn out to be a *turning point* in your career.

You can use adversity as an excuse, or you can use adversity to create a practice that is more alive, full, complete, and in harmony with your deepest and most significant values and strengths. Choose life, not death. Choose hope, not fear. Get involved, and develop new positive and life-enabling habits.

- Work on your health.
- Work on your relationships.
- Work on yourself.
- Be a model for your spouse, your kids, your team, and your patients. **DE**

A practicing dentist, Dr. Michael Schuster founded the Schuster Center in 1978. Guiding over 3,500 graduates to achieve wealth and freedom, the Schuster Center is the first business school created exclusively for dentists. It celebrated 30 years in 2008. Dr. Schuster is a cadre and former director at the Pankey Institute, adjunct faculty at the Dawson Center, OBI, and LSU Cosmetic Continuum. Michael Schuster can be reached at www.schustercenter.com or drmikeschuster@msn.com.