



Great leaders guide our profession in turbulent times

For more on this topic, go to www.dentaleconomics.com and search using the following key words: *mentoring, role model, leadership, creating wealth, Dr. Michael Schuster, the Schuster Center.*

† *Joseph Schumpeter named our current economic situation “Creative Destruction.”*

† *George Land calls it “Break Point.”*

† *I refer to it as a “Turning Point.”*

Whatever you call it, **IT'S A TIME OF CHANGE.** Change brings crisis to some and opportunity to others. It's times like these that leaders guide and show the way to an optimistic and hopeful future. As a practicing dentist, I often wonder what would have happened in my dental career had I not met, befriended, and been mentored by some of the finest dentists who have ever lived. When I meet others who are stuck or struggling, I think of this: **“You'll never be any better than the five people with whom you spend the most time.”**

We all need mentors and role models. A mentor is someone who takes a personal interest in you. I've been doubly blessed to have studied with and been mentored by Drs. Bob Barkley, L.D. Pankey, F. Harold Wirth, Henry Tanner, John Anderson, Peter Dawson, and Charles Wold. The best dentists I'm privileged to work with today all had significant mentors or role models in their lives.

Our technical mentors provide us with the “vision” of what our treatment goals for patients should be. We envision the “end result” from our technical mentors. Those with only a dental school education have some knowledge and limited skills and abilities to resolve minimal problems. Once we gain a picture from our technical mentors, we either have the motivation, determination, and resolve to help our patients move forward, or we don't. I'm writing not only from my own experience, but also that of thousands of general dentists, endodontists, periodontists, orthodontists, oral surgeons, and pediatric dentists with whom I've worked. As I reflect on my experiences with my mentors, I realize they gave me far more than technical leadership.

Great mentors serve as great role models regarding how to live and conduct your life. With each of my mentors, I gained tremendous insight regarding professional ethics:

I do the right thing for my patients for the right reasons. In fact, I still keep pictures of my mentors in my office. Early in my career I was greatly influenced by Drs. Pankey, Anderson, Dawson, and Tanner. Their theme was “Do the best you can for the sake of the patient.” I later met Dr. F. Harold Wirth, who treated me like a son. With nothing to gain, he nurtured, helped, and guided me as I moved my practice from Dubuque, Iowa, to Scottsdale, Arizona, to begin the Schuster Center.

What makes a great mentor

When I met with great people such as Drs. Peter Dawson, Charles Wold, L.D. Pankey, or Harold Wirth, the conversation always revolved around doing something significant for people. I cannot remember any conversations about them, or what they were getting, or how much money they were making. The conversations were always about how to help fellow dentists, make the profession better, improve the lives of patients, and find ways to make a difference. Sometimes those differences were in the lives of dentists who impacted their patients every day in positive and life-affirming ways.

I am absolutely convinced that one of the main influences in your professional life is the people you associate with (the five you spend the most time with). Mentors who care deeply about you and your future also have a great influence on your life.

Of course, parents can be wonderful guides and mentors as well. But their greatest influence normally happens within the first two decades of a child's life. Once someone starts dental school and a career, the influence of parents subsides and the influence of dental mentors becomes much greater.

As we become busier in our practices and personal lives, there seems to be less time for guidance, reflection, and contemplation about what we're doing and why. Even though I've taught technical dentistry for years, I've found that how we manage our practices and ourselves, and how we lead our practices and ourselves, have as much influence on the success of our practices and personal lives as do our technical mentors.

We gain the “vision” of what we want to achieve from our advanced technical training. But we obtain the possibility to create it from our management and leadership

models and mentors. The common thread among my mentors was that they each had a strong philosophy, a set of values and beliefs that guided their day-to-day lives and practices.

I think it would be tough to fill a seminar entitled “How to Instill Your Philosophy into Your Day-to-Day Practice.” In essence, this is what our mentors help us with. We see them, study with them, and observe their success, not only in practice, but also in life, and we want to emulate them. The most successful dentists I’ve met are successful because they learned the strategies, methods, and models that led to success for other dentists ... and their success becomes our success. Success is simple if we find the right mentors, study with and observe them, and spend time to get to know them. Many dentists jump from one treatment philosophy to the next and never learn any philosophy well enough to excel.

I can remember Dr. L.D. Pankey saying repeatedly, “Strive to be the best, because there are so few up there. But strive to be the best for the right reason, and that is to serve patients to the best of your ability.”

These influential leaders are wise. They have tremendous depth and deep faith in God. Their strong faith and love not only transfer into their day-to-day personal lives, but also into their practice lives.

Recently I was fortunate to begin work with several specialists: two orthodontists from Michigan and New Mexico and an endodontist from Montana. I’m doing continuing work with an oral surgeon from Florida. They are all searching for management and leadership models to help instill the strong beliefs learned from their mentors into their professional practices. I find that many general dentists who are studying with Drs. John Kois, Jim Benson, Frank Spear, Mike Pikos, and Carl Misch are searching for ways to instill the “technical philosophy” they’re learning into their practices.

As one form of our culture comes to an end, a new one is emerging

We’ll be different in the future. Patients will seek to simplify their lives. As our country becomes more diversified, we will honor differences more than in the past.

We will seek authenticity. It is a time for *leadership*, which requires *value clarification*, *future focus*, and *direction*.

Patients need sincere help and guidance. So do we. Dentists need a strong set of values and beliefs to guide our personal and professional lives. Our role models and



mentors have more influence on our lives than we understand as we progress through life. Choose your mentors wisely. Follow those who are not only successful in their practices, but also in lives.

Be a role model and a mentor to others. Find someone to mentor or guide. Understand that you can be a mentor or role model for every team member and patient you engage. Modeling is the strongest form of influence, and actions are far more vital than words. You have a tremendous opportunity to positively influence the lives of the thousands of patients you will see in your practice. No matter the time, place, or number of years you’ve been in practice, as a dentist you’re more than a technician. You really are a leader and a role model.

Consistent characteristics in all great mentors

- They aspire to excellence.
- They never stop learning.
- They generously share their knowledge and wisdom.
- They are performance or achievement oriented, but not just for themselves.
- They seem more interested in the success of others than in their own success.
- They are dedicated to making a difference in their patients’ lives, and in advancing our profession.
- They have groups of individuals who challenge them and hold them accountable.
- They care deeply about people and see dentistry as a great way to make a difference in people's lives.

Leaders influence us and we influence others. It’s kind of like *pay it forward*. What mentors do more than anything else is help us believe in what is possible. They raise our thinking and actions to the level of our true potential. With mentors and role models, we individually and collectively reach a higher level of our potential. **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. He can be reached at www.schustercenter.com or drmikeschuster@msn.com.