

A Story That Reveals How to Improve Your Practice in a Few Weeks and Achieve Exponential Growth in the First Four Years

*Harmony*

# DENTISTRY WITH A VISION

Building a Rewarding Practice  
and a Balanced Life

*fulfillment  
Success*

Gerald I. Kendall, PMP

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# **Dentistry with a Vision: Building a Rewarding Practice and a Balanced Life**

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# PREFACE

The story you are about to read models the principles that were applied in Dr Wadhwa's practice with astounding results—from below zero net profit to more than \$3 million in 10 years, with the expectation of exceeding \$4 million in the next year—while simultaneously improving the quality of patient care. Of course, this didn't happen overnight. Yet, once a few strategic changes were made, Dr Wadhwa saw real improvements in the practice within weeks and incremental increases in profits every year, reaching the \$1 million benchmark in the first 4 years. We want to share these principles with you so that you too can benefit from an immediate impact on the success of your practice. Experiencing these benefits will keep you and your staff motivated so that you will continue to implement the changes and reach even higher levels of efficiency, reliability, profitability, and enhanced patient care.

You may wonder why we chose to write this book as a novel. Over the years, we have read many dental and medical practice management books and articles that describe an approach using theoretical language but do not address the complex emotional and practical struggles involved in making changes in a practice. Practitioners may read the book and understand the principles, but when it comes to implementing them in their own practice, they come up against unexpected roadblocks, such as resistance from their staff, and then become frustrated, lose momentum, and fall back into old habits. The novel format allows us to convey complex strategies using visual and emotional examples that the dentist can relate to, making the learning process much easier and more enjoyable while improving retention and the ability to apply the principles to the practice. In addition, the fun and easy-to-read format of the book makes it appealing to the entire office staff. It is exceedingly difficult for a dentist to sustain improvement without the full cooperation and enthusiasm of the staff. By reading the book, staff members will understand their role in the process and become indispensable partners in implementing the changes.

Another problem with most practice management approaches is that they do not address the natural cause-and-effect nature of implementing changes in a practice. If you change one process or procedure, it impacts others. The change on its own may be positive, but the ultimate effect may be negative or—worse—insignificant. If you invest a lot of effort to make a change in your practice and the result is trivial, it can drain your energy to the point that you don't even want to try again. The story in *Dentistry with a Vision* clearly demonstrates the effects that will result from procedural changes, including implications for the staff and the emotions involved in the struggle to improve. It also helps practitioners who may have tried to implement some of the common practice management paradigms in the past to recognize the invalid assumptions behind them. For example, many practice management seminars, books, and articles focus on personal efficiency and cost cutting. However, we have seen many times over how this approach limits the growth potential of a practice and adversely affects the quality of patient care and the happiness of the dentist and staff. The approach of *Dentistry with a Vision* is to show how to apply proven business methodologies to a dental practice in order to be able to provide better care for more patients in a way that makes the practice more profitable. To

provide further clarification or emphasis for some of the most salient points, we have included notes in the margins of the story text.

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Part I of the book illustrates the basic root causes of many problems in a practice. There is undoubtedly a great deal of complexity in running a successful practice; however, we show how there are just a few key leverage points underlying many of the problems in a practice that can be used to improve that practice.

Part II illustrates the Five Focusing Steps, which help you discover those few, precious leverage points in your own practice. To many dentists, it appears that the only way to improve is to work harder—either by working faster under great duress or by working more hours—to maintain the quality of health care. When applied in real life, the Five Focusing Steps reveal a much simpler, albeit rather counterintuitive, answer.

To sustain success, however, a practice must do more than just improve its ability to deliver patient care. Part III deals with two “dirty words” in many professional practices—marketing and sales. Most professionals whom we meet want to do more of the work that they enjoy. They just don’t know how to develop the demand for those services. These chapters show how to capitalize on the extra capacity of practitioners and staff that was developed in the previous chapters by creating market demand. The story will show why a professional selling approach is a must for every health care practice.

By applying the techniques presented in these first three parts of the book, a practice will experience immediate growth. However, eventually the practice will stagnate unless the dentist develops new skills in processes and managing people. Part IV shows how, in a few steps, a practice can apply scientific approaches to improving quality, reducing waste, and managing people. These chapters also discuss an approach to scheduling that fulfills the needs of both the patient and the practice.

Appendix A spells out the step-by-step approach that formed the conceptual framework of the novel—the Vision Tree. This is a new tool that we have used in many improvement efforts over the past few years. Finally, Appendix B provides a concise step-by-step summary of the approach illustrated in the story.

Our goal is to help you see your way out of the stress of constant cost-cutting by giving you a new, practical, tested, and enjoyable means to improve your practice. Enjoy!

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# ONE

## *Just Another Day in Crisis : Dealing with Staff Challenges*

“Oh my God,” Sarah cried into the phone as Brian walked into the office. He had feared a crisis even before he set foot in the building at 7:45 am. The yellow Volkswagen Bug and the red Mustang convertible were not in their usual assigned parking spaces, so he already knew that his hygienist and chairside assistant had not shown up for work. Having to deal with staff absenteeism and their day-to-day issues made his stomach churn. He wondered what sort of personal crisis Sarah was tying up the phone line with today. It seemed to Brian that Sarah had crying spells at least once a week. As he passed the reception area, he saw her weeping into the phone and ignoring the line of patients waiting at the reception window.

His wife, Jen, had told him that he needed to change his attitude toward his staff. She suggested that if he tried it, he might be surprised to find that their attitudes would change as well. But Jen didn't have to walk in Brian's shoes through the constant crises in the office. It seemed like every day he was dealing with another disaster. Brian had little patience left for these things as he worried over financial challenges, like the fact that it seemed patients were constantly canceling procedures because the out-of-pocket expenses were too high. Running a successful practice involved prioritizing and encouraging unprofessional behavior by coddling weeping employees was not at the top of his list, no matter what his wife or all those practice managers out there might say about learning to empathize with your staff.

Brian embarrassedly looked out at the waiting room. He could see the discomfort on his patients' faces as they tried to unobtrusively glance at Sarah. One of them must have been waiting for at least half an hour for Melody, his hygienist, to begin. Usually, Sharon, his assistant, arrived early and got the room ready for his first patient, pulling charts and setting up instruments, and Melody should have started cleaning her first patient's teeth by now. Where could they be? Maybe they were planning a shopping trip or hung over from a night out. He scolded himself as soon as the thought formed. He didn't know why they both happened to be out, but a part of him didn't trust his staff and thought that they sometimes took advantage of him.

Reluctantly, Brian approached Sarah and motioned that he wanted to talk to her out of the hearing range of the waiting room. Without acknowledging his head motion to come into his office, Sarah wailed, “Dr Lerner, she's in the hospital!” All of the patients turned to see how Brian would respond.

“Sarah,” he replied sternly, “Who's in the hospital?”

“It . . . it . . . it's Sharon,” she stuttered, sobbing. “Melody is with her.”

Immediately, Brian felt guilty for assuming the women were in cahoots. Sharon, his 26-year-old assistant, was the best assistant he had ever had—even though she tended to be moody and too serious—and with her five-foot four-inch, well-filled-out frame and cute blonde hair, she provided the kind of attractive, friendly image that Brian wanted for his practice. Melody, the hygienist, was also an



excellent employee. Her work ethic, rapport with the patients, and professional skills were superb. This situation was serious—not only because Sharon was injured but also because he had no idea what he was going to do with his waiting room full of patients.

“Sarah, please try to calm down. Come into my office and tell me what happened.”

“Melody, I’ve got to go. Call me back in a few minutes, promise?” Sarah hung up the phone and walked nervously into Brian’s office. Brian followed closely and shut the door. His five-foot ten-inch frame was average but towered by almost a foot over Sarah. Wanting to make her feel comfortable, Brian sat down on his couch.

“You know how torrential the rain was when we left work yesterday?” Sarah began, weeping again. She plopped down onto a cushion and began wringing her hands and shaking her head. “Well, Sharon’s car hydroplaned into a guardrail when she was getting on Highway 90. Melody was right behind her. She saw it all!”

Not waiting for a response, Sarah continued, “Sharon didn’t have a seatbelt on, and her head hit the windshield. Her car was totaled, and she was hurt really bad. They are doing some kind of brain tests on her. Melody stayed with her all night. She’s still there. Dr Lerner, what are we going to do?”

Brian’s head was spinning. What were they going to do? After a pause, he told Sarah, “Give me five minutes to think. In the meantime, Sarah, please apologize to the patients in the waiting room for the delay. Tell them an emergency has come up, and we’ll give them an update in a few minutes, OK?”

As Sarah closed his office door, Brian couldn’t stop his mind from calculating what this mess was going to cost him. Melody generated a lot of the next month’s business. She was not only superb technically, but also a great salesperson. Even one day without her could cost him several appointments. And without Sharon assisting him, he would only be able to handle a portion of the patients on his own. This crisis was going to take thousands of dollars out of his monthly profits.

Feeling overwhelming self-pity and exhaustion from the stress, Brian wondered why he had to deal with all of this “other stuff.” When he started his business 12 years earlier, he was in his 20s and enthusiastic about facing different but fulfilling technical challenges every day, building a lucrative practice, being respected by his patients, and being his own boss. His mentor, the assistant dean at the university, told him about the pitfalls of managing staff. But Brian had focused more on controlling costs by watching every penny. He believed having too much staff would rob him of his profits. But now he was about to lose a lot of money because he didn’t have enough staff.



**Staffing challenge:** Protecting the practice from unexpected events and Murphy’s Law

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He thought for a moment about a seminar he attended the previous year in San Diego. The facilitator claimed that any dentist could build a successful practice by billing very high fees, charging approximately four times the laboratory costs, reducing the number of patients seen, and minimizing the staffing headaches by keeping only one or two key staff members. He was told that reducing overhead expenses would allow him to provide quality care without management headaches. The facilitator never talked about how staff could help generate income. Brian supposed that meant he should be the one to “sell” the treatment plan to patients, but he wasn’t very comfortable with it.

Wouldn't patients be skeptical about a dentist's motives for encouraging certain treatments? And wouldn't they feel too intimidated to ask questions of the very dentist who was both recommending and performing the treatment? Every time he thought about this, Brian remembered a consulting friend once telling him that successful consultants never sell themselves. For all of the money he spent on that seminar—and others that espoused the same principles—he felt he should have come away with at least one ingredient of the recipe for financial independence.

Brian brought himself back to the present with a shake of his head. He would have to give his practice strategy some serious consideration, but this situation called for immediate action. He chided himself for being so self-absorbed when Sharon was in a possibly life-threatening situation. Why shouldn't Sarah be upset? Sarah was acting on an emotional response to a horrible situation. She was probably feeling totally paralyzed imagining Sharon's head smashed into pieces.

He called Sarah back into his office to go over the plan for the day. He was prepared to deliver his thoughts in a logical and straightforward way if she came in crying, but she walked in with an air of confidence and looked him in the eyes squarely. Brian was impressed. With the immediate shock over, Sarah was now ready to deal with the situation. "Dr Lerner, what are we going to do?"



### **Staffing challenge:** Balancing compassion and efficiency

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Brian knew Sarah, though, and there was still a chance he could upset her to the point that she couldn't work. He paused for a moment, trying to weigh the risks and benefits of taking the time to show empathy for Sarah versus taking quick, practical steps to resolve the situation. Brian knew that firing orders at Sarah to manage the situation could interfere with her ability to handle the overload of work that was suddenly going to be thrown her way. He decided to try a direct but compassionate approach to make sure Sarah was on board with the plans they made.

"This is going to be tough. We need to support Sharon, but we also need to take care of our patients. Sarah, I need your help today, and if we work everything out, we'll finish early and head right over to the hospital together, OK?"

Sarah nodded, so Brian continued. "Melody is with Sharon, so she's not alone. Until the doctors have run tests and assessed the results, there's little that we can do. But there's a lot we can do here to make sure there's an orderly office for Sharon to come back to when she's recovered."

Brian looked at Sarah to make sure she was still open to listening, and when he saw her perk up, he continued, "First, I need you to call the temp agency and see how quickly you can get a hygienist. Next, I'd like you to explain to the patients that because of a car accident, our hygienist will not be in today. Reschedule all of Melody's patients for the rest of the day. In 10 minutes, bring in my first appointment, and cancel all of my appointments after 3 pm. See if they can come in on Friday morning instead."

As soon as Brian said "Friday," he felt guilty. His older daughter's kindergarten graduation was on Friday, a big deal in her school. Jen would be furious. Come to think of it, so would Joe Armstrong—fellow dentist and his best golfing buddy—who had lined up a game for them Friday morning.

Sarah nodded and left quietly as Brian began to prepare for his first appointment. Brian realized

with relief that he had resolved at least one of his conflicts—he'd managed to show warmth toward Sarah and secure her cooperation in a rational course of action. Of course, if he had an office manager, all of this would have been taken care of, and he would be free to do the work he enjoyed doing. But a good office manager cost so much money, and he'd just have to work harder to pay another salary.

These thoughts were still nagging at him as his first patient settled into the chair. In his head he could hear the facilitators of the seminars he'd attended saying, "Reduce overhead!" "Minimize staff!" "Every penny counts!" The last seminar had him calculate the cost of one additional salary allocated per procedure over the year. He almost laughed thinking that it wasn't that significant—pennies, really—but the seminar leader made a big deal out of it. Sure, he thought, a cent saved here plus a cent saved there is still only two cents. Where was the half million dollars he expected to be earning by now? He surely wasn't going to get it working four days per week, especially when it seemed like every week had its own crisis that ate up valuable time. Trying to put these thoughts aside for the time being, Brian made a mental note to call his best friend, Rich, who had a very successful dental practice in Albany, New York, and was an expert in matters of practice management.

Without Sharon assisting, all of the appointments took longer than planned. Brian gulped his lunch down in five minutes to try to make up for lost time. The stress of having no one chairside took its toll, and by the time he and Sarah were on the road to the hospital, Brian's stomach was churning again, and his head was pounding. One thing was certain: He couldn't stand too many more days like this one.

Attempting to shake off the growing feelings of self-pity and apprehension, Brian looked over at Sarah in the passenger seat and could see she was deep in worried thought as well. "So, how did your day go?" he asked.

"It was OK, I guess. I spoke to Melody a few times. Nothing's changed. The doctors won't talk to her, and Sharon's family is driving in from Buffalo, so they won't be at the hospital till tomorrow afternoon."

"I'll see what I can find out," Brian offered, bringing the second smile of the day to Sarah's face. It was then that Brian realized how little empathy it took to help others feel good. He also recalled how taking a few minutes that morning to acknowledge Sarah's concern and include her in the formulation of a plan had allowed them to accomplish a lot together. He felt grateful for her efforts, which had resulted in a better outlook for the rest of the week. She had gotten Melody to agree to come in on Friday to make up as much time as she could, set up a temp to fill in for Sharon starting tomorrow, and rescheduled all of the patients they hadn't been able to see that day.

When they entered Sharon's hospital room, Brian and Sarah each hugged Melody. "How's she doing?" Brian queried quietly, noticing that Sharon's eyes were closed.

"I was so scared because she didn't even know my name last night. But she just woke up a few minutes ago and recognized me and even joked about the accident! So, I think she's going to be OK," Melody said hopefully, with tears beginning to well up in her eyes.

"That's fantastic!" Brian almost shouted. He couldn't help but wonder why women always seemed to cry about good news. As soon as he had the thought, he remembered a recent rebuke he had received from his wife. "Brian," Jen had said caustically, "sometimes you come across like a chauvinist. Your comments about women are getting out of hand. If you really believe everything you're saying, you need an attitude adjustment." Brian had gotten really mad and defensive at the time, but now he was beginning to think she was right.

After confirming with Sharon's attending physician that she had no life-threatening injuries and would fully recover, Brian left Sarah and Melody just before 6 pm, which meant he would still have time to spend with his three- and five-year-old daughters before Jen put them to bed. He vowed that tonight he was starting a new direction in his life and practice. In his mind, Brian set three major goals:

1. Make a lot more money without working more hours
2. Adjust the way he treated his staff so that they enjoyed being at work
3. Spend more time at work doing things he enjoyed and less time doing things he hated

Brian felt a little guilty for focusing on money first, especially right after a hospital visit, but at the same time he realized that he needed to be profitable if he was going to sustain his energy and improve his attitude toward his staff and his practice. Brian knew that there were two conditions that were absolutely essential to have a financially successful practice: (1) keep his expenses under control and (2) increase the amount he was taking in after paying for lab services and supplies. The only major expense he could really control was the cost of his staff. On the one hand, he felt pressured to minimize the number of salaries he'd have to pay. Yet if he calculated the amount he lost when employees were absent—planned or not—he wondered if hiring extra staff might actually be a beneficial strategy.

Once Brian pulled into the driveway, he didn't get the chance to think about the staffing problem further. As he exited the car, he was greeted by two beautiful little girls running toward him and screaming, "Daddy! Daddy!" Sometimes, life was beautiful.

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# TWO

## *A Tough Call: Spending Money to Make Money*

“If I gave you a million dollars cash, no strings attached, would you take it?” Rich Small asked his best friend. Before waiting for a reply from Brian, Rich demanded, “Where is your resistance to increasing your staff coming from, buddy? You know I would never give you advice that would hurt you! And I’m giving you a million-dollar piece of advice!”

On the other end of the line, Brian thought back to the night before. He and Jen had a long talk after he missed his daughter’s kindergarten graduation. She wasn’t angry with Brian for missing the graduation. She accepted that the circumstances of Sharon’s car accident put Brian in that situation. It was Brian’s constant stress at work that really bothered her, and the fact that he came home every day depressed, angry, and exhausted. Brian had decided then that he needed to follow through right away on his idea to consult with his friend Rich.

Rich was Brian’s best friend and one of the most successful general dental practitioners he knew. Rich had earned more than \$750,000 the year before and was determined to reach his goal of \$1 million, working four days or less per week, within the next five years. He had graduated only a year earlier than Brian, yet he was earning more than triple Brian’s income.

Brian met Rich in high school in Brooklyn, New York, and even back then, Rich had everything going for him. The six-foot two-inch football player always got straight As. And while Brian went to state university at Albany to complete his pre-dental education, Rich got accepted to MIT and completed a biomedical engineering degree in just three years. He entered Stony Brook dental school a year earlier than Brian. There, Rich would come up with conceptual models that could improve the flow of patients through a practice, and he would talk about systems and designs that were beyond the imaginations of other dental students with no engineering background.

He had been hesitant at first to unload his problems onto his best friend, but once they started talking, Brian could tell that Rich genuinely loved to discuss practice strategy and share his ideas and insights. He was beginning to wonder whether Rich would be happier if he were a consultant rather than a dentist.

As Rich talked about Brian’s potential to reach his financial goals, Brian reflected on his own drive for success and motivation to accomplish his goals and realized that the force behind that drive had dissipated over the years since graduation. Here he was, the son of Russian immigrants who came to America with nothing and managed to build a business and a life in the strange land of New York City. He inherited those values of pride in good, hard work, striving for a better life, and never losing sight of one’s goals. But wait—what were those goals again? And pride—in what?

Brian’s thoughts went back to the days when he helped his parents at their newsstand outside Grand Central Terminal during evening rush hours, and how his mother always insisted that he finish his homework between customers. It was there that he met Jen, also an ambitious student, buying papers

in the morning on her way to class, and their plans for a life together grew out of the values set down by the previous generation.

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### **Persistence alone is insufficient for success.**

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One of these values was persistence, a strong characteristic that both his parents possessed, and it had paid off for them. But in the past few years, Brian's practice was failing to gain momentum, and he recognized without a doubt that persistence, by itself, was not enough to be successful. As he began to pinpoint his own role in his practice difficulties, he felt better able to hear what Rich was communicating. He had lost sight of his fundamental thought patterns. This analysis brought him to a sudden, clear realization. Simple and shallow as it sounded, it was about money. He simply had to do something about generating more personal income from his practice.

Of course, piling up money was not the goal, and it alone would not remedy his problems or show happiness upon him, but money bought a comfortable home life for him and his family; vacation getaways to recharge their spirits; enjoyable distractions such as dinners out, season tickets to various entertainment venues, and club memberships; a top-notch education for his children; and a secure future for his family. *Those* were the rewards he had been working so hard for since school, the goals he could not lose sight of: enjoying life inside and outside work, taking care of the health and happiness of his family, and securing a financially stable future to the best of his ability.

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### **Money itself is not the ultimate goal, but it is a necessary condition of success.**

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"Brian, I'm telling you that you can double your income *and* reduce your stress in a year by adding staff." Rich's voice pulled Brian out of his reveries.

"But, Rich, what you're telling me is the exact opposite of what I paid good money to hear at every seminar I've attended in the past two years." Brian was open to listening to what Rich was saying but hesitant to accept everything he was told without question. His parents had also taught him to proceed cautiously and with practicality.

"You've seen my records. You know I'm taking three quarters of a million out now after all expenses."

"Look, I'm not saying you're wrong. But just a few months ago, I met a dentist who had to put his practice up for sale. He had increased his staff and added two dentists, but he couldn't manage it. In fact, the stress almost drove him to a nervous breakdown. I'm just telling you that I don't see how your advice is applicable to *my* practice. North Dakota is not New York. People won't pay the high premiums here if they don't have insurance, and you know what insurance pays. Plus, good staff is extremely hard to find in Grand Forks."

“Brian, do you think that Albany is such a haven for rich dentists and hygienists? The competition here is cutthroat. It’s not about getting higher fees or billing rates. And it’s definitely not about cutting costs. You have to hire more staff.”

The immediate image that came to Brian’s mind was of the factory where his dad first worked—a steel mill north of Pittsburgh, constantly shrouded in dark clouds amid gray buildings and smokestacks. Except the mill in Brian’s mind morphed grotesquely into a dental mill where a parade of miserable, underpaid, slumped-shouldered staff trudged through the door every day, clock watching every few minutes to see if it was time to go home; where nameless, faceless patients overcrowded the cold, empty waiting areas; and where the dentists didn’t care—they, too, just wanted to go home. An overdramatized comparison, yes, but his attempts at making money as a dentist had thus far resulted in disappointment and frustration, and at this stage of his career, he felt dissuaded from taking any chances outside his immediate comfort zone. Hiring staff beyond what he already had felt dangerous close to the gothic dental mill scenario.

In his first year in practice, Brian was in New York, struggling to build his business and pay the bills. Starting a practice from scratch meant joining a lot of social activities to meet potential patients. To get his name out there, he went on the radio to do a talk show intended to educate patients about dental problems, hygiene, and preventive maintenance. He even tried in-office marketing tactics but felt bad about direct marketing to patients.

After a couple of years, it was clear that Brian was not making it in New York. As a dentist starting out, he could not keep up with high rents, high salaries, and stiff competition. Much to his parents’ and in-laws’ dismay, Brian started searching ads for a practice to take over in a small town. He found one in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where winter almost never ended. Jen supported Brian’s decision to move there, especially when the Grand Forks bank agreed to finance the entire transaction. The city was desperate for dentists, and Brian and Jen received a royal welcome during their first week in the north country. But since then, try as he might, Brian was still having trouble making his practice successful.

Given this history, Brian felt he had solid experience to back up his resistance to Rich’s advice. Brian sounded testy as he responded, “Look, before you repeat yourself about hiring more staff, can you answer one question for me? Other than sending my stress barometer through the roof, what does my current staff level have to do with the earnings of my practice?”

“OK, I’m going to take it one step at a time, so even *you* can understand,” Rich said with exaggerated sarcasm.

“You mean you might finally explain instead of lecture!” Brian retorted.

Rich chuckled, then continued. “For the past two years, you’ve tried following the cost containment advice that you heard in all those seminars. So you followed a policy of having just a few specialized staff, right?”

“Right. I have just one full-time and one part-time hygienist and one assistant. Unless you call my receptionist, who also bills the insurance, sets up appointments, answers the phones, updates records, cleans the bathrooms, etc, a specialized staff member.”

“No, you’re right. By specialized, I mean doing one function most of the time, not 20! But look at what happened with this cost containment approach. Did your staff have any regular free time, or were they busy all the time?”

Brian hesitated a few seconds, and replied thoughtfully, “Well, Sarah—the receptionist—can only afford to take a few minutes for lunch most days.”

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Rich interrupted, “Brian, listen to yourself. Your staff is busy all the time.”

“Yeah, good thing! If they weren’t busy all the time, I’d be paying them for nothing. Look how much they cost me.”

“No, Brian!” Rich almost yelled into the phone. “You’d be paying them to protect the throughput of your practice.”

“Whoa, slow down, Rich. You lost me.”

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### **Negative consequences of focusing on cost containment when staffing a practice**

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Rich took a deep breath before continuing. “Last week when Sharon had her accident and Melody was also away, who had to make all the office decisions?”

“I already told you. I did.”

“Is anyone in your office cross-trained to do any other person’s work?”

“No,” Brian hesitantly replied.

“So when your staff is busy all the time,” Rich explained, “and no one is cross-trained and you have one hiccup, you have a staff shortage. It’s a crisis every time one of your staff is sick, has a doctor’s appointment, takes a vacation, or is too stressed out and decides not to come in to work. Brian, think about it. How often do you feel you’re short-staffed?”

Brian thought for a moment. “Every day. I spend a significant amount of time doing office stuff that I don’t want to do and not enough time focusing on my practice—doing what I was trained to do. Doing what I *want* to do,” Brian answered truthfully. “It’s not just the ‘hiccups’ that you mentioned. It’s the daily follow-ups with insurance, with my bookkeeper, with suppliers, new computers, office maintenance, you name it. But if I add more staff, won’t I be making less money?”

“Wait a minute before we jump to adding more staff. You’re the one that told me to explain, not lecture. So let’s take it slowly. Tell me what happens when you have a staff shortage.”

“Insurance doesn’t get billed. Patients aren’t called back. We don’t fill appointment times.”

“So the first thing that suffers is your cash flow. It becomes a struggle to pay the bills and continue to take out the draw you want,” Rich observed.

“True, but I also notice that I get more complaints from my staff. They seem stressed.”

“But you said that your staff members aren’t cross-trained. So wouldn’t that mean that their workload doesn’t go up when someone is absent?” Rich asked.

“Not exactly. First, if we can get a temp, we’ll do it. But temps don’t necessarily know our procedures, so my staff has to then take time to explain the ropes to them. That’s extra work, extra time. Then, the temps usually don’t do as good or as complete a job as our regulars, so my staff has to



‘clean up’ after the temps. And then, even though my regular staff is not cross-trained, I expect them to at least try to fill the gap. This means they sometimes try to do someone else’s work and end up making mistakes, and patients think the service is lousy.”

“Brian, you’re only beginning to understand the truth about staff shortages.” Rich understood Brian’s feelings of uncertainty. He knew that the most important coaching he could give Brian at this point was to help him discover the facts for himself, so he asked, “Would you please do me a favor?”

Brian was surprised by the feeling that came over him. For the first time in two years, he was hopeful about making real progress in achieving his goals, even if it meant change. “Sure, I’ll do you a favor—whatever you want, Rich. What is it?”



### **Document the effects of staff shortages on your own practice.**

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“Over the next two weeks, I want you to observe and record in a daily diary every significant effect staff shortages have on your practice. Walk around your office observing. Talk to patients, labs, anyone you can think of who might be affected by your staff shortages. Let’s talk again in two weeks and compare notes.”

“Compare notes?” Brian asked.

“Yeah, I’ll share the analysis I did two years ago that led to the changes I made, the three quarters of a million in income this year, and most importantly, a much happier, less stressful life.”

“Finally!” Jen exclaimed after Brian hung up the phone. His smile stretched from ear to ear. Jen was eager to hear what had transpired to elicit such a reaction.

As he described the conversation to his wife, he felt more and more excited about a new direction for his practice.

Jen tried to caution him. “Honey, you’ve tried lots of different ideas, and so few of them have worked out. I want to see you successful and, more importantly, happy. I know it’s Rich’s advice and all. But if this idea isn’t successful for *you*, I don’t want you to feel so disappointed that you give up hope.”

Jen was a couple of years younger than Brian but street smart in ways that Brian never was. She had grown up in a middle-class family, but both her parents had put themselves through school while Jen was very young. She had to work her way through school on her own and help her parents at the same time.

“Jen, when you experience a new insight, do you feel a sense of anticipation inside your belly, like something really good is going to happen?” As he spoke, Brian’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Every time I’ve had that feeling, I’ve ended up having a great experience. It’s the same kind of feeling as when we bought this house, when you told me you were pregnant, and when I started dental school. And I promise you, if I ever give up hope in dentistry, I’ll do something different.”

For Jen, the long kiss that she initiated was all about Brian’s recognizing how special her pregnancy had been. Brian’s reaction to her was fueled by her understanding of him and sharing his excitement

about his practice. Neither of them could possibly anticipate that Brian was going to learn far more than he anticipated—and maybe more than he wanted to—about human nature in a dental practice. But in that moment, nothing beyond that moment mattered.

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# THREE

## *No Time for an Emergency : Identifying Scheduling Problem*

At 6:30 am on Monday morning, Brian sat at his office computer, eager to start the assignment Rich had given him. During the past few months he had found it difficult to get up and go to work every morning, with a motivation level that had him arriving at 8:30, barely in time for his first patient. He had gotten to a place of hopelessness from which he could see no way out. Today, he found himself invigorated because he had opened his mind to change and finding a way out of the misery caused by previously insurmountable challenges.



### **Effect of staff shortages:** Open time in schedule

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It was blessedly peaceful lounging in his black leather chair early that morning, a latte steaming on his desk. Brian opened his new diary to the first blank page and wrote, “July 29th,” and below it, “Effects of Staff Shortages.” As he searched his online practice management system, the first thing he noticed was the amount of open time in the schedule over the past month, particularly in July. Of course, early summer was usually a little slower, but not this slow. He pulled up last year’s July schedule for comparison, and sure enough, he was down 25% in booked appointments from a year ago! How had that happened? he wondered, dumbfounded.

Brian began furiously shuffling the papers on his desk until he found the last American Dental Association newsletter. He quickly reread the article “US and International Trends in Dental Demand,” which claimed that there were shortages of dental health care providers throughout the country. If that were true, why were his appointments down?

Panic started to set in, consuming the positive energy he had begun the day with. If he let this feeling take over, he might fail at Rich’s plan before he even started. But his thoughts centered on the 25% cut in booked appointments, which meant a more than 25% cut in his profit share because his overheads were also up this month. The lab charges were increasing, salaries were going up, courier charges were through the roof—he might have to give up the cruise he had planned for his and Jen’s anniversary in December.



### **The Five Whys**

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While combing his brain for some inspiration to reinvigorate his attitude, he recalled a technique preached by the Toyota leader Taiichi Ohno. He said that whenever he wanted to understand the reason for a problem, he asked “why” five times. Brian had discussed the program with Rich, who was not only aware of Ohno but a passionate follower of his principles. Rich had later given Brian a couple of books on the Toyota Production System and Lean thinking.

In desperation, Brian started to apply Ohno’s technique. In his mind, he stated the problem first: We are down 25% in booked appointments from a year ago. Why? His gut reaction was anger—if he knew, then he wouldn’t have let it happen. But maybe he did know. That made him angrier. Brian tried to take a step away from those feelings, remembering that the answers you’re supposed to seek are much simpler than you would think. You’re supposed to look for the immediate and most obvious reason why.

Brian tried again. Why are we down 25% in booked appointments from a year ago? This time, the answer came without effort. It’s probably because our receptionist booked 25% fewer appointments for this month. Duh, he thought to himself.

Feeling a bit skeptical at the absolute simplicity of this answer, Brian nevertheless asked himself the second why. Why did our receptionist book 25% fewer appointments for this month? Most of the appointments for this month were booked over the past two months. It couldn’t be because of Sharon’s accident—that was just last week.

He thought back further in time. Sarah had taken sick leave a few times several weeks ago. She had caught the flu, and then her son had gotten the flu. Because Brian had no notice of Sarah’s illness, he had no receptionist the first day. And the second day, the temp arrived late, leaving Brian no time to explain the computer system and office procedures. By the afternoon of the second day, Melody and Sharon were both climbing the walls. It was Sarah’s job to do the paperwork, bill insurance, record new appointments, etc. Instead, it seemed like everything that Melody and Sharon asked the temp to do either was not done or was done incorrectly.

When Sarah returned the following Monday, it took her all week to catch up on the mess. Instead of spending time on the phone with patients and sending mailers confirming appointments, she was on the phone correcting errors with insurance companies or in the guts of the practice management system, trying to figure out how to correct all of the temp’s mistakes.

Two weeks’ worth of appointment booking were lost out of that month. That’s it! he shouted inside his brain. That accounts for the 25% loss in business in July! Ohno was brilliant!

But Ohno asked *five* whys. Brian only completed his *second* why. Yet he had the answer, didn’t he? He glanced at the clock. It was already 7:30 am. It couldn’t have taken him a whole hour to ask two whys, could it?



**Effect of staff shortages:** No time to train temps or other employees to fill in for missing staff

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As Brian’s mind went over the same ground again and again, the third why came to him. True, the

absence of one staff member required him to hire a temp. But why couldn't the temp keep his schedule as full as Sarah could? The answer was obvious—because there was no one around to orient the temp to the work. She made so many mistakes because there was no one available to train her.

The fourth why arrived without effort. Why was there no one available to orient the temp to the appointment-booking and insurance procedures? Brian took the blame for that one. It was because of his policy to keep staff to a minimum. The answer to the fifth why was even harder to take. Why did he have this policy to keep staff to a minimum? Because of a deep-rooted belief, reinforced by his training and the seminars he had attended, that he *had* to do it to control his expenses.

Rich had said last week that it was important to control his expenses, but not if it meant draining the life and productivity out of the few staff he had. He said that 100% efficient use of every staff member was impossible and promised to explain it further in their next conversation.

Just as Brian completed his notes on his preliminary observations of the effects of staff shortages, the main phone line began to ring. Normally, Brian didn't answer the main line, but he glanced at the caller ID and noticed that it was the office of Dr Christopher Jones, the premier, upscale Grand Forks family physician for the rich and famous (not that there was anyone famous in Grand Forks). Jones was also the medical commentator for the local and regional media. It was 7:45 am, an unusual time to be receiving a call from a famous GP's office. Brian answered and was surprised to hear Chris himself on the other end of the line.

"Brian—I'm so happy to hear your voice," Chris exclaimed. Brian wondered why since Chris and Brian had barely exchanged two words in the past year. It wasn't that they were unfriendly. It was just that Brian and Chris traveled in different social circles. Grand Forks was not a big city, so their paths crossed occasionally at charity events, golf tournaments, and the like. Chris was certainly not a snob, and Brian was genuinely pleased with Chris's warm greeting. At the same time, he was not at all sure of what he might be able to do for Chris. Brian didn't have to wait long—Chris got right to the point.

"I have a long-time patient, Mark Anderson. You know him—president of Grand Forks Auto, and he also owns the McDonald's franchises here? Well, his son was playing football this morning with some friends while they were waiting for the school bus. And I guess he was concentrating so hard on running for the ball, he ran right into an electric pole, knocked out two front teeth, and suffered some other facial damage. The hospital is taking care of the facial trauma, but the emergency physician didn't give Mark a whole lot of confidence that he could save Jake's front teeth. Brian, can you do a personal favor and help out Mark and Jake? I know you did this type of work at the hospital some years back, and, uh, word has gotten around that you have some exceptional talent in this area."

Brian knew that the recommendation must have come from Dr Harry Wharton. Brian had worked closely with the oral and maxillofacial surgeon at the hospital emergency department when he was briefly considering oral surgery as a new career path.

Brian asked Chris to hang on for a minute while he took a quick look at the day's calendar. He groaned, seeing that either the temp or Sarah had booked a full day with no buffer for emergencies, contrary to his directive to always leave a little extra time for catching up and emergencies. Brian got back on the line with Chris and replied, "Chris, I would love to help out, but I just looked at the calendar, and I've got a full schedule. The procedure would probably take a couple of hours, and I'm afraid to make a bunch of patients mad at me. Isn't Harry available to do this? He's the best in town."



**Effect of staff shortages:** Lack of adherence to proper procedures

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“Unfortunately, Harry’s on vacation, and I don’t want to leave something like this to chance. Mark is not only a patient, Brian—he’s a valued friend. Hey, if it will help you out, you can tell any patient put out by this that I will provide a free consultation or flu shot in return for their inconvenience. By the way, Mark said that if I could convince you to do this, you could bill him \$1,000 for the service.”

Brian was amazed at how highly his “talent” was regarded. He knew this was exactly the type of service that he needed to be able to provide regularly to have a more financially rewarding practice. But to do so, he needed the time buffers in his schedule to allow for emergency procedures. He also needed marketing services. I might as well admit it, he thought. I need more staff.

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**Effect of staff shortages:** No extra room in schedule for emergencies and no staff available to do marketing for lucrative services

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Setting all of that aside for the moment, Brian made a quick decision. “You know, if I head over to the hospital right now, I can take care of Jake and be back here by 9:30. Do you happen to have the direct telephone number of Altru’s emergency department and the name of the attending physician? I’ll clear my consultation with him and see if they can have everything ready for me by the time I get over there. And Chris, tell Mark not to worry. Jake will be in good hands.”

Just before Brian rushed off to the hospital, he added a few items to his list of staff shortage effects:

- My schedule is not set up correctly with time buffers to allow for emergencies and other lucrative work.
- Staff are not available to offload my work or to help do marketing.
- I’m not able to take advantage of the most lucrative markets.

Altru Hospital was only 10 minutes away. Jake was prepped and the necessary surgical kit ready. After performing the procedure (a total of 25 minutes from beginning to end) and having a quick conversation with Jake’s dad, Brian was already on his way out of the hospital. By 8:50, he was back in his office, having kept his first patient waiting for only 20 minutes.

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**Effect of staff shortages:** Wasted time and lost revenue due to poor procedure preparations

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Brian marveled at how quickly an emergency procedure could be completed if all the necessary

preparations were done before he arrived. He mentally noted another item to add to his growing list: ~~The preparations necessary for him to work efficiently were sometimes missed or done sloppily.~~ As a result, the allotted time for procedures had to be increased, he couldn't complete as many appointments per day, and his revenue and profit potential dropped.

With a sigh, Brian remembered all of the blank spots in his calendar for the weeks ahead. Even if he could do his work faster, it wouldn't immediately yield more dollars . . . or would it? Promising himself that he would continue to ponder these questions later, Brian dove into the day's full patient load.

After he left the day's last patient in the room with Melody to finish up, Brian went into his office. His private line began to ring as he filed some paperwork away. It was his good friend and colleague Joe Armstrong. Brian greeted his friend heartily, thinking Joe must be calling to reschedule their missed golf outing. But Brian sank heavily into his chair when Joe uttered his first sentence.

"Brian." Joe's normally robust voice sounded weak and laden with despair. "Barb is leaving me."

As Brian listened, he thought of another, indirect repercussion of staff shortages—the destruction of a marriage.

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# FOUR

## *The Intervention : Learning from Mistakes*

They all pulled up together in front of Barb and Joe’s house in Rich’s Lexus LS460 luxury rental car—Rich; his wife, Liz; Brian; and Jen. They had agreed to take the risk that Joe and Barb might throw them out once they realized their guests had more planned for the evening than just a dinner party. “I hope Barb doesn’t kill Joe for telling us about their problems!” Jen whispered to Brian as they approached the house.

It was Friday night, exactly a week since Rich counseled Brian about his practice management problems. Brian had called Rich early the previous morning, eager to share his progress on the diary project. But even more importantly, he wanted to talk to Rich about Joe’s marriage problems, hoping that together they could find a way to help the situation. He couldn’t believe that Joe and Barb’s problems could be so serious and irreparable as to end a long, successful, stable marriage.

“Out of all of our friends, who has the most rock-solid marriage?” Brian questioned as soon as Rich picked up the phone.

“I won’t mention that it’s 7 in the morning here because you know that,” Rich grumbled, his vocal cords not yet limbered up. He forcefully exhaled the night’s carbon dioxide, then grudgingly asked, “What’s going on with Joe and Barb that’s so important you would wake me up early on the one morning this week I can sleep in a little?”

“What if I told you that I have two pages in my diary on why problems at Joe’s work led to Barb threatening to leave?” Brian asked with obvious excitement in his voice. He was anxious to tell Rich what he had discovered about his own practice and how he believed it could help their friends. Not waiting for Rich’s encouragement, he continued, “When Barb and Joe decided to have kids, Barb had a very rewarding career of her own. She had and still has a small practice counseling teenagers as a consultant to the regional school board. She volunteers for the Meals on Wheels program as well. So she made a deal with Joe before she became pregnant that she would give up some, but not all, of her career and volunteer work to raise the kids for their first five years. However, she absolutely had to have Fridays to devote to her other interests. So Joe agreed to be a full-time parent on Fridays.”

Rich didn’t bother to stifle a yawn. “What does any of this have to do with your staff shortages? Wait a minute, am I dreaming that I’m having this conversation or . . .”

“Rich, listen carefully. You and I both love Joe like a brother, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Rich mumbled, “and brothers sometimes hate each other too!” Rich’s point made it almost too easy for Brian to continue.

“Exactly. Rich, you are so much more successful than Joe and me that, well, I wouldn’t say we hate you, but we’re both probably jealous of you from time to time. Which is why Joe never told either of us that he is having major financial problems!”



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