Ask the big questions and get what you want!

By Roger P. Levin, DDS

Dr. Brown* couldn’t quite figure out what was happening in his dental practice. He’d lost some of his energy. His practice was doing OK, but he felt something was amiss. His attitude toward the practice had changed from the time he had first opened his doors.

In the beginning, he had unlimited enthusiasm. Now, as he approached his late 40s, the excitement was wearing off. He enjoyed providing patient care, but the responsibilities of managing a practice combined with being the main producer was driving up his stress level, which, in turn, was causing stress for his staff as well as his family at home.

To add to his restlessness, Dr. Brown was not making as much from the practice as he knew he could. His practice growth had slowed. Part of this was a result of the current economic situation. There were other dental practices in his area with drop-offs in income too, though there were also some that were growing despite the economy. In any case, his practice was in a flat period. He couldn’t set aside as much as he wanted to for retirement. His kids were going away to college, and he had to save up for tuition.

Dr. Brown knew he could change things, but he wasn’t sure how. With the help of his Levin Group consultant, he started asking himself some important questions. It was then that he realized he had a lot more control over his future than he initially thought.

Ask the big questions

Levin Group teaches doctors to develop a Life Plan as part of any management consulting engagement. In this exercise, doctors ask vital questions about themselves:

◗ What do I want out of life and my practice? What is my vision?
◗ How will I achieve that vision?

Every doctor is likely to answer these questions a different way. Some dentists are happy to practice four days a week and leave the remaining time for family. Other dentists want nothing more than to practice five days a week while they attend continuing education classes on a regular basis. Some like long vacations. Some get fidgety if they are away from their office for more than a few days. None of these dentists are taking the wrong approach — they are doing what is important to them. However, deciding these things for yourself is absolutely necessary. Your answers, and your vision, will dictate how you develop your personal and professional goals.

As for Dr. Brown, he began his own process of discovery. He knew that once he figured out what mattered to him, he could begin creating a better life for himself and his family.

Getting what you want

The first thing to do is identify what is most important to you. It may be to run a million-dollar per-year practice. Or you may have more personal goals, such as spending extra time with your children, going on exotic vacations, paying for your children’s college or contributing toward your parents’ care. No matter what your goals are, the most important thing to do is figure out what will make you happy and what kind of practice you want. This is your vision for the future.

You might approach your Life Plan by asking yourself the following question. If you were meeting with a practice advisor three years from today, what would you list as your most important accomplishments? Also, what 20 or 30 things would you most like to accomplish during your lifetime? You should write these things down. Even if the goals seem frivolous or unreachable at the current time, during this current economy, write them down anyway. Over the years of consulting to practices, Levin Group has helped many dentists achieve goals they considered unattainable when they first came to us.

In his quest to be successful and start developing his vision for the future, what objectives should Dr. Brown set? He should consider setting two kinds of goals: short-term goals and long-term goals.

Short-term goals

Your initial task will be to decide which of the 20 to 50 goals you wrote down are attainable within the next 12 months. Then, start working toward them.

Let’s say a goal of yours is to spend more quality time with your family. Thus, in order to start scheduling time to go to the movies, have dinner out or go to a sporting event with your family, this will mean that you’ll need to free up time at

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the practice by streamlining your schedule or increasing your case acceptance rate for larger cases. Perhaps hiring a practice management consultant to update the systems within your practice could be another of your short-term goals.

Whatever they may be, review your goals daily. Doing so will keep your objectives clear and will motivate you to achieve them. Once you begin achieving these shorter-term goals, the excitement will motivate you to work on longer-term goals.

**Long-term goals**

Long-term goals help define your Life Plan, in both your professional and personal life, including your retirement. The following are examples of long-term goals dentists have shared with us at Levin Group while we worked with them on their Life Plan:

- Make cosmetic procedures 50% or more of their total production.
- Build a college tuition fund for their children.
- Achieve a net worth of $4.5 million through practice production and investment.

**Setting a life plan into motion**

A visual depiction of your goals in the form of a flowchart or outline will be extremely helpful in putting your plan into action, especially if it includes a timeline for achieving your objectives. This can serve as a quick reference and help reinforce those goals when other matters occupy your time.

Evaluate your goals weekly or monthly. Pick a time (preferably the same time each week or month) when you can gauge your progress, keeping in mind that you will not achieve any of your goals overnight. It may be helpful to jot down some notes about your progress for each goal as you review them. Also, you can study past notes to see how you have progressed. Keep track of where you have been and an eye on where you are headed.

**Conclusion**

When you take a trip, it’s usually best to know where you are going. Your life is a journey too. At first, Dr. Brown was operating without a life course, and you can see where that got him. He felt overworked and stressed. He’d let the economy dictate the growth of his practice rather than use the resources for practice management that were at his disposal. Once he took the time to ask himself the big questions, he saw how much potential he had for both personal and professional growth.

Writing down what you want, working toward your goals and monitoring your progress along the way are your keys to accomplishment. This is true no matter how you define a great life. Start developing your vision for the future and start planning for total practice success!

Getting your practice systems in order is usually the first step in creating the practice and life you envisioned for yourself. Dr. Levin’s upcoming Total Practice Success™ seminar in Nashville on May 28–29, 2009 is a great step toward that goal. Dental Tribune readers are entitled to receive a 20 percent courtesy on this seminar. To register and receive your discount, call (888) 973-0000 and mention “Dental Tribune” or e-mail customerservice@levingroup.com with “Dental Tribune” in the subject line. Readers can also visit www.levingroupgp.com for more information.

*Based on Levin Group client information.

**About the author**

Dr. Roger P. Levin is founder and CEO of Levin Group, a leading dental practice management consulting firm that provides a comprehensive suite of lifetime services to its clients and partners. Since 1985, Levin Group has embraced one single mission — to improve the lives of dentists.

For more than 20 years, Levin Group has helped thousands of general dentists and specialists increase their satisfaction with practicing dentistry. Levin Group may be reached at (888) 973-0000 or at customerservice@levingroup.com.

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