

A Commitment to Developmental Management

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Early on in my career, I wanted to be busy doing dentistry, and filling all of my open time with patient stuff was my definition of dentistry! When I became very “busy,” I found out that I did not like it! A question arose in me, “What am I missing?” That question started a search. In those days, I did not have the benefit of google.com! The process of new discoveries required reading, going to a lectures or workshops, listening, doing something different, and then reflecting on my learning – a slow process.

Along the way, I wrestled with the issues of managing and leading. I often asked myself if they are really different. Could I do both? Beyond the responsibility of being the Operations Manager, there was the responsibility of leading and managing, which are hats that we all wear as owners of a dental office. Leading and managing are both important! The difference between managing and leading is simply this:

Managing: All great managers excel at turning a person’s talent into performance, and in this way, great managers speedup the reaction between each employee’s talents and the organization’s goals.

Leading: All great leaders tend to be restless for change focused on a better future. The best definition of a leader that I have been able to construct through the years states, “A Leader is a person who is willing and able to influence behavior; their own first then others toward a preferred future.” Willing has to do with our attitude and able has to do with our skill sets; we are in charge of both!

The focus of this article is on the issues of Great Managing. As I look back, two individuals greatly shaped my thinking in this regard: Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D. – the “father” of strengths-based management, founder of Selection Research, Inc. and later CEO and Chairman of the Board of the Gallup Organization, and Charles M. Sorenson, PhD – who brought much of Don’s work to dentistry through the development of experiential learning and growth processes designed to facilitate team/management development.

Don Clifton and Chuck Sorenson introduced me to the concept of “Developmental Management.” It was a concept that held the best of what I came to understand of Great Managing and Great Leadership in the same crucible; work them together yet at the same time kept them uniquely separate. In the early 70’s the conventional wisdom of management a la the American Management Association was captured in their slogan,

“Getting work done through people.” Don Clifton would say that the AMA has got it wrong in that it mistakes the essence of great management. To capture the essence of Great Management, it would be best stated “Getting people done through work.”

So you say, “What does Great Management look like?” I see it played out in the manager and in the employee who is being managed. I would use many descriptive words or phrases like performance, consistency, loves what they do, knows people by name, smiles a lot, winning personality, intention, and takes initiative to engage others, to name a few. In Great Management, Developmental Management, the manager excels in identifying a person’s individual talents and connects them to the goals of the organization, which in turn is expressed in individual performance.

People grow more when they have a chance to use their talent – a talent practiced turns into “a strength.” When people get a chance to do what they do well, they look and feel like a “natural.” They do a better job and build their self-esteem all at the same time; “people getting done through work!”

Let me see if I can quickly state in a simple ten-step Approach the complexity of my learning over nearly forty years.

(1) Belief in Talent: There is a popular belief that anyone can do anything; all you need is desire. Much research in the behavioral sciences has proven otherwise. Talent is individual, and once we believe in talent, we realize that productivity in the workplace is basically the right person in the right place in an organization; simple but not an easy task!

(2) Study Success: To be able to understand talent, we must first become proficient in recognizing it. Therefore, we must study it. Most of us grew up studying what was wrong rather than studying what was right. I found out that success is not the opposite of what is wrong. I learned best by studying what is done well by myself and others and then asking the question, “What is the talent that is becoming a strength through the leveraging of that talent to get a specific job done?”

(3) Focus on Excellence: As you spend more time studying success you can focus on excellence. One of the big learning’s around excellence is you can increase employee productivity tomorrow, all you have to do is recognize excellence (productive behavior) when and wherever it occurs! Most of the time, our tendency is to recognize people when things are not going right; we have been trained well to focus on what is wrong throughout our educational process – from K – Professional School. Think about it! This is moving from weakness rather than from strength.

(4) Move from Strength: To become more of what we are, it becomes imperative that we begin with our strengths and use them as often as possible. The essence of Developmental Management is to arrange things in your organization so people can do a

lot of what they do well. Don Clifton used to say, “We develop the talent and manage the weaknesses.” Do not ignore weaknesses; neither should you focus on them, rather find strategies to accomplish individual and organizational goals with the intention to move from individual strength.

(5) Build One-on-One Relationships: A person’s unique talent develops best in response to another human being. If an employee, or patient for that matter, knows that you care about them, for their own good, they will let you help them. Within that one-on-one relationship, your care and expectations become motivating to them and will accelerate their learning and growing. Through having the right expectations, then, you help the individual connect their learning and growing to their own internally held values.

(6) Have the Right Expectation: Persons typically are not high achievers until someone expects something of them. If the expectation coincides with the talent of the person, there is internal motivation plus learning and growing accelerates. If, on the other hand, the expectation is wrong, say too little or too much, we can discourage or destroy a person. If we repeatedly ask a person to do something that they do not have the supporting talent in their “talent bank,” we will destroy them. Therefore, it is crucial for a Developmental Manager to study a person’s talent to achieve the right expectations. It is an awesome responsibility in Great Managing.

(7) Keep Decisions as Close to the Action as Possible: Delegation can be received as a gift if it results in the opportunity for a person to make significant choices. For through choice, a person discovers their feelings of ownership. It is a basic management principle that “people tend to support what they help to create.” Managers who boss people can increase production in the short term, but managers who develop feelings of ownership in the talented person, create an internalized responsibility to sustain productivity.

(8) Conceptualize Your Organization: When managers can explain how the organization is organized, how it operates and its goals, then there is concept. Each dental office needs a simple organizing concept around which many systems operate. Based on your concept for your office, your systems will operate differently. For example, is your office promoting a Crisis or Proactive approach to dental health? The answer to your question is a concept you build your systems around.

People tend to stay in environments they understand, and this concept makes consistency possible and promotes learning and growing for all of the stakeholders. Learning and growing is very natural and works to support your organization. What have you done intentionally within the last six months that expresses to your team that you are committed to their learning and growing? Did you invest in only your continuing education or also theirs?

(9) Measure Performance: If you have the belief that people like to achieve and feel accomplished, then you will be challenged to find uniquely individualized ways to

measure or keep score. (How many of you enjoy golf, football, baseball, tennis or any other sport? Would it be as much fun for you if you didn't keep score?)

Don Clifton would often say, "Achievement is realized in its fullest only when there is objective measurement, which means we can count, rank, or rate the individual's productivity." "Measurement improves performance" is another widely held management principle.

(10) Create a Team: Creating a team is a continual process in most organizations, not just dental offices. It requires a lot of energy on the part of the manager to hold out for the right person when you are tempted to just fill the empty slot in the roster. It takes a long-term perspective to understand, use, and maximize the best talents of each person to create a winning team.

Creating a great team is not about being static but rather about being constantly adaptable in the moments of creating an exceptional patient experience. For there are always new situations occurring that call for a rearrangement of people and resources in a dynamic organization – how else would you meet all of the daily challenges? This is a different picture than the organization that is relatively inflexible, where each person only does a certain task. Therefore, this is the major responsibility of managing an organization that would seek to serve a uniquely individualized clientele. To be congruent, the team members need to function with each other in serving the patient base.

To manage effectively, you need to genuinely care about the well being and success of each of your team members. Pick good people, set clear expectations, recognize and praise excellence, and show you care. These are the

basics of good managing but they do not guarantee success.

To succeed as a Great Manager, you will need to acquire an entirely different skill set than those above; the ability to discover what is unique about each person and then figure out how to best incorporate this uniqueness into your organizational goals and overall plan of action, on a daily basis. Do the discipline of Developmental Management; it pays great dividends. Remember it takes intention, time, and reflection! u

Author's Note: Since becoming Director Emeritus of the Business Systems Development Department at The Pankey Institute in May of 2004, I have "reengaged" and formed Evergreen Consulting Group – Dedicated to the Learning and Growing Professional. I welcome a visit from you at our website and should you desire further exploration of our uniquely individualized services, please contact me at:

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