

# STEPPING UP!



**Y**ou've graduated dental school, finished an AEGD or GPR and now it's time to make those professional dreams a reality and begin the life you have envisioned for yourself.

While there are many paths to success, one ingredient for it remains the same... *Stepping Up!*

BY DAN MARUT, DMD

Now is the time to step up and be a professional. Dental school has enabled you to earn a license to practice. The reality of our profession is that license is actually a license to learn more than you can imagine. Dental school just set you up for a lifetime of learning. This is just the beginning, the tip of the iceberg.

I have written about new dentist issues and answered hundreds of questions over the years from new dentists. For this article, I wanted to take a different approach. Instead of writing about only my opinions and experiences on the road to practice nirvana, I wanted to reach back in time and contact my old classmates and ask them a question...

**“If you could tell yourself something 10 years ago that you know now, what would you say?”**

With the advent of facebook and social media this was easy to do and I was surprised by some of the responses I received.

## ASSOCIATESHIPS

Being employed as a doctor is a new experience for us all when we graduate. Many new dentists have been employed before in some capacity and some new docs have never had a job. Associateships can lead to great experiences for some, while others they can be a nightmare. No matter the experience you have, understand “why” you are there in the first place. Is it to gain valuable clinical speed? Earn a paycheck and enjoy life for a while before you become a practice owner? Whatever your intention, learn as much as you can from the good and the bad. Many times bad associateships show you exactly how you don’t want to practice! A quote from my classmate Dr. Leonardo Lee, “Your first job is not the last.” At the very least, while you are an associate improve your clinical skills and find a role model either in the practice you are working or outside of the office. Having a mentor to help guide you through the ups and downs can make all the difference in your career satisfaction early on. Humility goes a long way, you don’t know everything and it’s important to know that you don’t know everything! Another classmate Dr. Tom says, “I think too many new docs starting out expect too much, and think they know how to do everything...be modest and build from the bottom up.” Envision the kind of dentist you want to become and find the people that can help you achieve your vision. There are many seasoned vets out there willing to assist; all you have to do is ask. The important goal here is to keep moving your career forward.

## PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Many of my classmates mentioned learning about practice management as an important topic for new docs and I couldn’t agree more. Dr. Matt Kingston explains, “Understand the business of dentistry. We are the president, CFO, human resources department, marketing director, and chief producer of our companies.” If your goal is to own your own practice, this is extremely important. You must understand a dental practice is a business. You are in the business of healthcare. If you have not owned your own business before, this can be one of the most challenging aspects to a new dentist. In fact, practice management questions are the majority of questions I have answered through the years and the main reason I created a social network for new dentists called NewDocs.com. Before spending hundreds of thousands of dollars purchasing or opening a dental business, be sure you have done your practice management homework. While understanding dollars can be as simple as reading a P+L statement, managing and leading a dental team, composed of a variety of personalities, can challenge you in ways you never thought possible. If leading a team or managing employees is brand new to you, team challenges can blindside you if you don’t possess skills in this area of practice. Even the most skilled clinician can be taken by surprise by practice management challenges. In the healthcare business world, it is not only your clinical skills that will make you a success. Believe it or not, the clinical dentistry becomes the easy part. Team challenges represent the majority of headaches felt by private practitioners. Learn effective business strategies and pick the brains of successful dentists. Find out about the many paths to success and create your own path from there. The more you expose yourself to different styles of practice, the better chance you will have finding the right niche for yourself.

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

In my opinion, there is no more important skill, aside from clinical skills, to possess as a dentist. Effective communication skills are one of the best investments you can make as a practitioner. It allows you to convey the importance of treatment effectively to patients and it allows you to lead your practice in a clear and concise fashion. There is a stat I once heard, “80% of people choose a dentist not based on their clinical skill.” Personally, I would venture to say it is closer to 90%. What do you think the reason is a patient will choose you and your office? It’s because of how you and your team communicate. Everything from how the phone is answered to the look of your office to how a patient is handled by your team members in the office. Yes, communication skills are not just for the doctor but also for the team. Your team members represent you and the entire office. If they are not trained to effectively communicate, it will make the road to practice nirvana much more difficult for you. Even after 10 years since graduation, I practice my communications skills daily looking for ways to improve and more importantly, understand my audience. Understand your patients and learn how to speak their language. Dr. Michael Luu sums it up beautifully, “Chairside manner. Patients are kings and queens. Without them we are nothing.” Couldn’t have said it better myself!

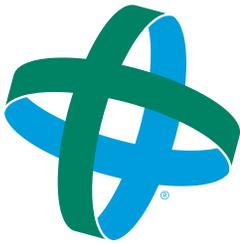
## DELEGATION

Many times as new docs we make the mistake of trying to do everything ourselves. The fact of the matter is we are trained as clinicians and we are dentists. We are not CPA’s, lawyers, practice management experts, or marketers. Don’t be afraid to spend money to hire experts to assist you along your journey in areas you have no expertise. Learn as much as you can from them. This goes back to “knowing what you don’t know” and hiring people to be on your team that can help you with areas that you don’t possess any knowledge. Your professional career and your practice are an investment. Treat it like one. Focus on what you do best and what you enjoy doing. Delegate the rest or at least until you have the skills and the desire to perform that function at a high level. Dr. Meredith Esposito suggests, “Take a lot of CE because you don’t know how to do anything. “ I would add, hire experts. This goes for anything from contract reviews to difficult root canals to marketing. Don’t throw away money and time trying to figure something out that another has already figured out. Learn from those with experience!

In conclusion, being a successful dentist and having a fulfilling career is more than just line angles and closed margins. Your success outside of your dental school walls depends on so much more than your technical ability. Patients assume all dentists have technical proficiency. While we must be lifelong learners and advance our own technical skills through CE, we must also develop leadership, management, and communication skills that will allow us to formulate a vision, make that vision a reality, and guide your patients in prevention and treatment of oral disease. We have a unique opportunity as dentists to affect people’s lives in a positive way.

As you progress through your career, remember to take opportunities to use your skills and give back to the community that you are privileged enough to serve. Enjoy the journey and make a difference! Step up!





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