

# Leadership Revisited

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here is a new momentum at the California Dental Association these days that has not been witnessed for quite some time. At the center of this movement is leadership. Combine the leadership skills of CDA administrative staff and volunteers with the active participation of local staff and leaders in the component dental societies, and you have the ingredients in place to successfully pursue the desired outcomes outlined in the vision and goal statements in the Strategic Plan of the association.

A discussion on leadership is particularly relevant at this time because of two recent events which illustrated the potential for an inspired leadership, and provided some early results illustrating the new energy referred to at the outset of this commentary. The first event was the Annual CDA Leadership Conference attended by CDA and Component Society leaders, and the latter was the Spring 2004 meeting of the CDA Board of Trustees that immediately followed it. Both events demonstrated to this observer some new opportunities and approaches that will assist the profession if it is to successfully negotiate the increasingly more complex social environment which it will face as the future unfolds.

Let's be specific. The conference commenced with a keynote address by noted Leadership and Management Consultant Lance Secretan entitled "Inspire! What Great Leaders Do." His definition of leadership is worth repeating here. "It is a serving relationship with others that inspires their growth and makes the world a better place."

If we replace the reference to "the world" with "the organized profession," we can anticipate that inspired leadership activity will lead to the successful achievement of the goals that the membership expects in return for their membership support. And, according to Secretan, a major step for great leaders is "creating an environment (i.e. the dental profession) that encourages followers to inspire their leader(s)." From long experience, we believe that such an environment is extremely important to motivating leadership to pursue goals with enthusiasm. They must receive support and inspiration from those they serve if they are to remain motivated and inspired to continue their effort.

Secretan ended his presentation with a quotation attributed to noted comedian Lily Tomlin who characterized the "solo" nature of the dental profession as many of us have known it, as well as any non-dentist could. "We are all in this together ... by ourselves!"

It underlined the necessity of individual professionals working together, and inspiring one another if desired outcomes are to be attained.

The conference featured a number of important and well-received breakout sessions, some of which were specific to those in leadership positions. One session that had a more universal application to membership beyond the ranks of leadership was titled "Recruit and Motivate Volunteers." It sought to inform leadership of the differences between genera-



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tions of dentists and how these generational groups might be best motivated to serve in leadership roles in the profession. Cynthia Brattasani, DDS, identified many of the characteristics that differentiate the newer generations in our profession from the more established older generation. She provided suggestions on how leadership activities might be modified to best accommodate the interests and needs of current and future new leaders.

Natasha Lee, DDS, a 2000 graduate who has established her practice in San Francisco, currently serves on the American Dental Association Committee on the New Dentist. In this same session, she provided a personal look at the significant financial burden that many, if not most new dentists face as they enter the profession and establish a practice. For established practitioners who have not been familiar with the escalating costs of education and establishing a new practice, her data on new practitioner indebtedness must have been an “eye opener.” The information she provided needs to be understood by those who lead at all levels within the profession if dentistry is to properly set its priorities and engage new dentists in the important work of the profession.

A final presentation by Gary Zelesky, a professional speaker and writer, emphasized a characteristic we have found to be present with many outstanding dental colleagues over time. While he intended his comment as a “service” leadership attribute, we have also seen it in successful practitioners who lead in the profession through sharing their expertise on treatment techniques and procedures. His admonition was “Passion is

your calling in life, and where there is passion, excellence is not far behind.” We have found the latter characteristic a much sought after achievement by many in this profession.

The CDA Board of Trustees commenced shortly after the conclusion of the leadership conference. For those trustees who had attended the conference, perhaps there was more inspiration than there might have been previously. And, maybe the structural reorganization of CDA staffing by Executive Director Peter Dubois had increased the excitement (and perhaps the level of inspiration) of board members as they settled into the agenda ably led by CDA President Dr. Debra Finney. The board proceedings that followed underlined the wisdom of Mr. Dubois’ reorganization that had as its objective, increased productivity by staff to make them more responsive to member needs.

Feedback from members during our history with the association has often offered the criticism that CDA has too often been reactive, rather than proactive in dealing with legislation, regulation, or policies of outside agencies that seem to negatively impact the practice of dentistry. There has also been a belief that the working relationships with the ADA on some major issues that either happen first in California or are unique to the profession here, have not been explored to the mutual benefit of the association or their members. Board decisions on some key initiatives emphasized the notion that there is a momentum building that demonstrates what the largest constituent dental association in the ADA is capable of accomplishing in the days ahead.

**Examples:**

1. The board allocated funds for the purpose of participating in a coalition to defeat any proposed split-roll tax initiative. A proposed initiative for the November 2004 statewide ballot would increase the tax rates imposed on commercial property by 55 percent. Any commercial property tax increase would have adverse effect on dental providers whether they own their building in which they practice or whether the tax is passed to dentists through lease or rental fees. The potential impact was estimated to be several thousand dollars per practice per year. This clearly is a proactive effort that seeks to prevent an additional future burden on practitioners.

2. The board approved start up funding and support for a California Clinical Research Collaborative with the five California dental schools. CDA will facilitate the startup of the collaborative and the CDA Foundation will be the granting agency and fiscal administrator for the collaborative. Pursuit of the federal grant to support this research is certainly in the best interest of discovering enhancements in the future of clinical practice. In a separate action, the board approved the funding of an amalgam-related analysis with the American Dental Association. Again, we see evidence of proactive effort aimed at finding answers and discoveries important to the future of the profession as opposed to waiting for outside interests to dictate our future. Continuation of a closer relationship that has been forged between the ADA and its largest constituent, CDA, will be of significant importance to organized dentistry.

3. As readers of this publication will recall, there has been significant discussion in the recent past about administrative problems with the California Licensure Exam. House of Delegates actions have resulted in the appointment of a Task Force on Licensure that will be deliberating on possible solutions this year. However, the deans of the California dental schools believe that current problems with the examination have resulted in a crisis that requires immediate attention. They requested and received the support of the Board of Trustees for their effort to have the Western Regional Exam Board (WREB) recognized as an examination alternative or option to the Dental Board of California examination for those seeking licensure in California. This is another proactive action because efforts are aimed to produce a short-term remedy for this problem before it escalates and negatively impacts the lives of new dentists seeking to be licensed in California

We believe that the type of recent actions specifically cited illustrate a new momentum that was felt by leadership during the most recent Board of Trustees meeting. There is a new inspiration felt from the top that has motivated the trustee leaders. As was pointed out in the conference presentations by Secretan and Zelesky, if these kinds of decisions successfully benefit the membership and are appreciated by the membership, it should result in the transfer of further inspiration and passion back to the leadership. That should further stimulate progress on other membership issues and needs by staff and association leadership.

**CDA**

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