



Transform your dental practice with the power of a compelling purpose

By Julie Parker

Identifying the purpose of your dental practice is claimed to be highly important. And, *in principle*, I agree. The purpose of an organisation can help to align team members and other stakeholders to work brilliantly together. Team members can experience higher levels of motivation because they each feel like they are working towards a greater good, towards something of deep value.

Purpose can be the North Star of your practice, clearly guiding the behaviours of those working within it.

The reason I say I agree with the importance of purpose *in principle* only is because we can only have high expectations of its impact if the purpose is sufficiently compelling.

I often help dental practices to identify their purpose. Initial inquiries result in some common responses:

- *Our purpose is to help people be healthier.*
- *Our purpose is to deliver high-level patient care.*
- *Our purpose is to help people be happier.*

Although these kinds of responses are accurate, are they inspiring enough, are they compelling enough, to deliver on the promise of serving as a North Star for the practice? I don't think so. I think purpose needs to be bigger, more specific and more meaningful.

In 2020, there was an episode of the SBS TV series, *Insight*, that I believe holds the key. The episode is called *The Dental Gap* and it was aired to help shine a light on why so many Australians are struggling with poor dental health. It asks the question, "What effect does bad teeth have on your life?"

Watching the stories of discomfort, trauma and shame of the participants being interviewed opened my eyes to a world I have not seen, despite working in dental practices for 36 years.

These people had completely neglected dentitions. Active disease, daily pain and inability to eat and speak normally was experienced by many of the audience members who had the chance to share their stories.

As I reflected on this *Insight* episode, I imagined how my motivation would have been different as a young dental assistant had I worked in a practice that treated patients at this desperate stage of need. I think I would have been quite different.

The Dental Gap program asks the question, "what would life be like with bad teeth". The appearance of missing, broken-down and decayed teeth would have you embarrassed to smile, avoid



The reasons for their poor oral health ranged from dental phobia, inability to afford dental services and embarrassment and fears of being judged by the dental team. As their oral conditions worsened, they felt less able to overcome the barriers and reach out for help.

During my career, I could count on one hand the number of extreme cases that I had witnessed. And, I think that this could be the case for many of your dental team members.

There are certainly dental practices in particular areas or who offer specific services that would see these kinds of patients more commonly, but it was not my experience.

being photographed and covering your mouth with your hand every time you spoke. The reduced function with just a partial dentition and no prosthetic replacements would dictate what foods you could include in your diet and prevent frequenting restaurants, preferring to eat only soft, easy to eat foods.

Your poor diet then negatively impacts on your general health as you struggle for adequate nutrition. Untreated periodontal disease means the remaining teeth are at various stages of mobility, further contributing to eating and speech problems. You know you have bad breath and you're embarrassed when you notice people around you step back to avoid the odour.

Every day, you experience some degree of discomfort and pain due to infected and/or exposed nerves. The constant active infection in your mouth creates and exacerbates overall bad health conditions.

With these kinds of physical setbacks, consider some of the emotional and psychological repercussions:

- Embarrassment and shame;
- Social isolation;
- Low self-esteem;
- Fear of rejection; and
- Depression.

How does such a person, with these physical and mental barriers, achieve professional, intimate and social goals? How could such a person build a happy life? I think the answer is... they don't!

The life of one who struggles with bad teeth is not enjoyable. The impact on life is one of limits and alienation. And the only way to turn things around is to do the one thing that creates terror: see a dentist!

Dental teams aiding patients in such dire straits find a deeper sense of purpose compared to those primarily dealing with

patients in good oral health. Teams guide patients in dire straits through *transformative* treatments, witnessing not only physical but also mental health transformations.

I consider it valuable and essential for all dental teams, regardless of their types of patients, to consider and articulate the true purpose of their practice. Sandy Roth, my dental patient communications guru from the USA, has often stated that dental practices help their patients to feel better, function better, look better and enjoy greater peace of mind. This wonderful phrase covers it all!

Without dental practices, the public would almost all fall within a range of failing oral health. To be part of rectifying and avoiding this scenario is something that can be highly compelling, inspiring, and motivating.

To establish a clear and compelling purpose in your dental practice, I recommend gathering your team to watch *The Dental Gap*. Immersing yourselves in the extreme end of oral health challenges can catalyse heightened awareness among

your team members. Discussing the hardships faced by those with poor oral health can illuminate the profound impacts that your profession can have.

This heightened awareness has the potential to not only uncover your practice's real and true purpose but also to make it your team's guiding North Star, steering everyone's actions towards a transformative experience for all stakeholders.

About the author

Julie Parker is a Dental Practice Management Consultant and Team Educator. At the age of 33, Julie became the first non-dentist to own a dental practice in Australia. Julie is Co-Founder of Julie Parker Practice Success and Co-Founder of Dental Business Mastery. Visit julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au and dentalbusinessmastery.com.au to find how Julie can help your dental practice be more successful. You will find information about consulting programs, online courses, podcasts, free downloads and more.

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