CORE VALUES and PRACTICE SUCCESS

by Marc B. Cooper, DDS, MSD

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

Introduction

What is the core of your practice? You are. How is your core expressed? It’s expressed as values – core values. Core values are a direct expression of who you are. Without core values clearly and solidly at the heart of a dental practice, the practice is limited in its performance.

Ask yourself: If you were a patient, what core values would you want your dentist to have? If you were a staff member, what core values would you want as the fabric of your practice culture? If you were an associate looking to purchase a practice, what core values would you seek in a practice?

When core values exist as platitudes, when core values are neither honored nor upheld, the essence, the mettle of the practice is weak and shallow. Without core values being venerated, the practice doesn’t have the necessary energy or chutzpa to effectively confront, nor take authoritative actions when challenged. It is fundamental and critical
for practice success that the dentist and the staff respect and faithfully adhere to the core values.

**What Are Core Values?**

If you Google “core values” today, there are 100 pages of articles, books, blogs, experts and processes on core values. If you go to Amazon.com there are 29 pages of selections. In the business literature, there are 50 years and over 1,000 articles that address core values and their impact on business. What is clearly recognized and well established is that core values are the bedrock of any successful business.

Ask yourself, “What are my core values?” The answer to this question is found through self-reflection and contemplation\(^2\). You can’t find these values outside of yourself. No consultant, advisor, book or blog can give you the answer. No one can tell you what core values to have. There are no “right” core values.

Core values are those values that are at the heart of who you are. They are those values that determine how you live your life. Core values shape your thinking and action. Core values ultimately determine your relationships. Core values provide a rigorous system of guiding principles and tenants that determine your philosophy of practice and of life. Core values are those values that you hold inviolate\(^3, 4\).

**Revealing Your Core Values**

How do you determine your core values? In our particular consulting method, we ask our clients first to complete our online value inventory\(^5\) which enables them to thoughtfully select their core values. Recently, we surveyed 1,000 readers of our online newsletter from around the world. We asked them to select their top five core values. We created our list of core values from numbers of sources \(^6, 7, 8\) with two additions we considered fundamental and critical to dental practice, responsibility and excellence. The results of this survey are as follows:
1. Integrity (72%)
2. Excellence (39%)
3. Honesty (37%)
4. Compassion (30%)
5. Responsibility (29%)
6. Respect (26%)
7. Caring (26%)
8. Commitment (25%)
9. Service (23%)
10. Doing the Right Thing (21%)

Interestingly, we found these results universal, no matter what corner of the globe we
surveyed, integrity, excellence, honesty, compassion and responsibility consistently
showed up in the top five spots.

Having consulted in other industries, including Fortune 100 companies, 3rd parties,
hospitals and hospital systems, to Silicon Valley start-ups, I have not seen these core
values predominate as strongly or consistently as they did in dentists in private practice.
Having consulted in numbers of other countries, where individuals inherently absorb their
society’s values much in the same way they learn their language, values often differ in
different societies. Yet, the core values of dentists were essentially the same regardless of
nationality.

**The Core Value Test**

Once our clients select their core values, we ask them to run their chosen values through
a series of questions based on the work of Collins and Porras. If it makes it through, it’s a
core value.
Core Value Test:

1. If you were to start a new practice, would you build it around this core value regardless of the location or type of practice?

2. Would you want your practice to continue to stand for this core value 100 years into the future, no matter what changes occur in the outside world?

3. Would you want your practice to hold this core value, even if at some point in time it became a competitive disadvantage - even if in some instances the environment penalized the practice for living this core value?

4. Do you believe that those who do not share this core value - those who breach it consistently - simply do not belong in your practice?

5. Would you personally continue to hold this core value even if you were not rewarded for holding it?

6. Would you stop practicing before giving up this core value?

7. If you awoke tomorrow with more than enough money to retire comfortably for the rest of your life, would you continue to apply this core value to your productive activities?

If you did not answer “Yes” to all these questions, it is not a core value.

Our evidence supports the well established assertion that when dentists, or any business owner, hold their core values as the heart, the center, the foundation – the core – of their dental practice, owning and operating a practice is much less stressful and markedly more successful.

Installing Core Values into the Structure of the Practice

Core values are the most immediate and unfettered expression of who you are. Since each individual is unique, their core values will also be distinct. Although dentists might
use the same word, i.e. integrity or excellence, their individual interpretations will
sometimes differ. Their individual definitions, both in the explicit and implicit, make their
core values idiosyncratic.

Here is an example of a client's core values. He is a highly regarded, tenured general
dentist and Kois mentor whose practice has a heavy emphasis on advanced restorative
dentistry. These are the values that made it past the defining questions.

- Integrity - Improvement
- Courage - Service
- Respect - Profit
- Excellence

Once their core values are selected and have passed the test, we ask each client to
express his or her core values as beliefs. Since we realize that a single word like integrity or
responsibility has different meanings to different people, having clients express their core
values as beliefs enables them to more precisely define what they really mean.

Here are the fundamental beliefs as an expression of this client's core values.

○ Integrity; We are honest. We do what we say we will do.

○ Courage; We have the courage to do the right thing simply because it is the right
  thing to do.

○ Respect; We treat our patients and each other the way we would like to be
  treated.

○ Excellence; We strive for excellence in all we do. Good enough isn't good
  enough.

○ Improvement; We strive to get better at what we do every day.
○ Service; We are here to serve our patients at a level higher than they have ever experienced.

○ Profit; It is absolutely necessary that we are profitable. Without profit, we can serve no one.

Now, having articulated their core values and expressed them as beliefs, we ask our clients to present their core values to their staffs, engage in a dialogue with them and get their feedback and comments. We recommend that the dentist ask their staff, “What does this particular value mean to you, your job, the practice, the care of patients, to our team?” When people share the same core values, it generates affinity, kinship, trust and team. When staff members do not share the same core values, there is commonly dissention, friction, and lack of relationship.

It is important to realize that only when core values are continuously reinforced do they exert ongoing influence. Core values gain power when expressed and beliefs are a very effective way to continually communicate and reinforce core values.

Once the core values have been identified, expressed as beliefs, and have been presented, discussed and mutually agreed upon with staff, we ask our clients to formulate their purpose and mission, based on their core values. We also request they look closely at their employee policies and governing policies to assure these values are infused in the structure of the practice and upheld. In essence, we ask our clients to build their entire business, leadership and management structures, directly on the foundation of their core values.

**Conclusion**

Our findings strongly support the assertion of many business experts - successful businesses stand with and inside their core values. In our client experience, dentists with successful practices rigorously and faithfully abide by their core values. They hold their
core values in place by frequently speaking them as beliefs. Once the core values can be expressed as beliefs, these practices can extend and expand these beliefs to generate their purpose and mission.

Our observation of successful practices is that core values dominate and are a direct expression of who the dentist is. Our assertion is dentists can’t build a successful practice with someone else’s values or beliefs. That’s why a consultant, advisor or coach can’t give the dentist the “right” answers.

The practice must be the dentist’s expression, not someone else’s. Now here’s the predicament: When the dentist understands that he or she is the heart of it all and their values are core, they must have the courage and trust in themselves to stand on their own and demand and rigorously hold fast to these values.

Each dentist has core values, but it’s our conclusion that it is those dentists who unconditionally commit to abide and follow their core values who are the most successful. All dentists have doubts and fears, but it’s those dentists who base their decisions and who own and operate their practices according to their core values who succeed over time. Successful practices let their core values, not their circumstances, govern and that makes all the difference.

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