Applying Transformational Leadership to Dentistry: Finding a Leader In a Dentist

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Applying Transformational Leadership to Dentistry: Finding a Leader In a Dentist

submitted to
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by
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for
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Abstract

A dentist holds a unique leadership position in which they must lead their dental practice, their dental staff, and their patients. The multifaceted nature of the occupation requires a combined team effort, and a cohesive partnership can be inspired through transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is a mutual process where leaders and followers empower one another and develop together toward a shared vision. Its effectiveness is implemented by the leader and further maintained by the followers. A transformational leader within a dentist can be manifested through the 4I’s of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. The four components supplement one another to establish a supportive work environment that motivates dental staff to pursue high quality dental care and find meaningfulness and satisfaction within their work. An authentic and caring dental team translates immediately onto patients who feel more comfortable and relaxed, and in turn are more willing to comply with treatment recommendations and be led through better oral hygiene practices. There is a positive feedback loop present within the application of transformational leadership in dentistry, a mutual benefit found across the board; the dentist finds balanced teamwork with their dental team, increased patient retention, and a growing dental business; the dental staff acquire personal and career development, and job satisfaction; and the patients are eased of their dental anxiety and see improved oral health and overall well-being.
Introduction

Leadership is a continuously evolving and adapting model, an umbrella term that encompasses multiple theories, behaviors, styles and qualities. It varies in its application based on the individual, the followers, the mission and values of the organization, and atmosphere. However, its base definition revolves around the ability to bring a group of individuals with varied skills, interests, and values together to cohesively pursue a shared vision or goal. In leadership, there requires conversation of followership. Leadership isn’t necessarily the process of putting an individual on a pedestal, rather it is the collaborative effort between the leader and follower, the mutual influence each counterpart holds on the other. It is a two-way street that requires a set of behaviors that foster and establish respect, trust and engaged effort.

Transformational leadership is a new paradigm of leadership where leaders motivate others to do more than is originally intended and empower followers to develop through close mentoring and attention to their individual needs and skills (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The key factor that distinguishes transformational leadership from other leadership styles is the focus on the individual before the performance or results of the task. There is an emphasis on the development process, a more holistic approach with the greater picture in mind. In the following paper, I will be analyzing how transformational leadership manifests within the dentist as an individual, in their relationship with their dental staff, and in their relationship with their patients. I will propose various approaches that dentists can take to effectively achieve the benefits of transformational leadership and convey the theoretical positive outcomes that can be identified. The foundation of transformational leadership is balanced, the multiple facets and components working together to formulate motivational means. I will intertwine these principles with the values of personalized dentistry, illustrating the importance of this authentic and individualized
approach that transformational leadership emphasizes in acquiring high quality dental care. In the process, I hope to convey the importance and effectiveness of transformational leadership within a dental practice, and encourage practicing dental professionals to reflect and consider implementing such a leadership style to their personal leader development.
Chapter 1

Why Transformational Leadership in Dentistry?

From a leadership perspective, the position of a dentist is quite unique, requiring both a business and patient oriented mindset. Their leadership is multifaceted and manifests in their ability to run a business, lead a team of dental assistants to provide quality dental care, and lead their patients through their personalized treatments. Due to the various taskings that are necessary of the dentist, an ideal leadership requires a collaborative effort. Simply, a dentist cannot effectively balance everything from scheduling appointments; walking each and every patient through the detailed procedures and expectations; providing bi-yearly check ups; conducting general cleaning; formulating and carrying out treatment plans, etc. If a dentist was to tackle this all on their own, they would be spread thin, unable to provide their full attention and optimal dental treatment and care. Thus, it is in their best interest to implement a collaborative approach. They need a front-desk receptionist to aid in organizing dental insurance documents and scheduling next appointments as well as foster a coherent partnership with their dental assistant/hygienists to provide the appropriate treatments for their patients. Furthermore, dentists have close interactions with their patients, seeing them consistently over long periods of time due to the nature of oral treatments.

Transformational leadership emphasizes an importance in encouraging and inspiring employees to be self-motivated to achieve work goals and perform in manners that align with the best interest of themselves and their organization. It requires the leader to apply a personalized approach to the development of each of their followers, stimulating engagement and passion to do more than what is expected. A transformational leader is aware that each of their followers have their own strengths and skills to bring to the table, and must work to accentuate and
supplement these qualities through close mentoring and guidance. Transformational leadership requires an extra step further from traditional leadership, fostering a mutual respect and trust that is sustained through self-motivation and drive. With this in mind, let us take a look at personalized care in dentistry. There is a patient-centric perspective here that revolves around providing customized and individualized dental care and treatments to each patient. As a dental care provider, the individual must acknowledge that every individual’s oral health needs, preferences and circumstances are unique and thus their approaches in not only treatments, but also interactions must be tailored accordingly. To effectively embody this, dental professionals must prioritize building trust through transparent communication and authenticity. Note the overlap between the values in transformational leadership and dental care. By implementing transformational leadership, a dentist can maximize the benefits of an engaged dental team, working to uphold a positive work environment, see improved treatment outcomes and run an overall highly-efficient clinic. Furthermore, this can directly influence and enhance a patient’s overall dental experience: alleviating dental anxiety, fostering improved patient satisfaction and thus leading to longer-lasting patient relationships and an enhanced dental practice. Modern dentistry is empathetic dentistry, a value and outcome that can most ideally be achieved through a close aligning and adopting of transformational leadership.
Chapter 2

The Dentist as a Transformational Leader

Dentist appointments commonly evoke fear and anxiety in patients. The routine is familiar: you check in with the front-desk receptionist, wait for the dental assistant to call your name, lay down in the dental chair, have the dental hygienist conduct basic check-ups and cleaning procedures, and finally have the dentist check for cavities or other discomforts. It is consistent and you expect each of these interactions and yet the experience doesn’t seem to get easier with frequency or age. So, why is it that we are afraid of the dentist? There are many explanations ranging from prior negative experiences, a learned fear of the pain, the sensory overload, or even the vulnerability of lying in a chair with only the sounds and our wild imaginations. Dentists can implement a variety of approaches to help ease these nerves and make the process more approachable and less intimidating for their patients. Leadership in dentists manifests in two main ways: through their ability to lead their staff through oral treatments, and lead their patients through said treatments. In such a context, the leadership of patients is defined as providing comfort and reassurance.

A dentist’s leadership style can directly affect a dental office’s communication practices, and specific leadership behaviors can affect the degree of team identity, interdependence and social distance, or the measure of influential power of team members (Chilcutt, 2009). Transformational leadership is a process of influencing in that leaders can change their followers’ awareness of what is important, and move them to see a more holistic picture, stimulating them to take on new perspectives and convincing them to strive for greater potential (Por Pan et al., 2020). When applied to dentists, this can be identified in their
characteristics/behaviors, ability to interact and set a supportive environment for their dental staff, and earn the trust of their patients through empathetic and authentic connections.

The transformational leadership model is built on four components: idealized influence (II), inspirational motivation (IM), intellectual stimulation (IS), and individualized consideration (IC). In application, each component dives into a different facet of how an individual can transform their followers to achieve their best selves.

**Idealized influence**

A leader possessing an idealized influence serves as a role model for their followers and supports this persona through responsible behavior and enforcing the communication of a collective goal (Bass & Riggio, 2006). An important aspect of being a role model lies in how the leaders are perceived by their followers. Followers who attribute idealized influence to their leaders see them as embodying power, confidence and charisma, and are more likely to develop a positive attachment to the organization (Afshari, 2022). Leaders can go about achieving this perception of idealistic and effective motives by implementing a more servant leadership approach as opposed to a self-serving style. A “servant leader” seeks and values the opinions and perspectives of others, especially their subordinates and customers, and realizes that the people are always more important than the process (Certosimo, 2009). The opposite would entail a self-serving leader, an individual who prioritizes their own needs over the needs of the subordinates of their organization. This style is a destructive leadership for dentists due to the collaborative nature of the occupation. A dentist can only be successful in their line of work if in cohesion with their dental team and patients. Thus, a dentist must make the effort to gain the
trust, respect, and admiration of their dental staff and patients through their actions and behaviors: looking and acting like a leader.

Idealized influence behaviors are displayed within transformational leaders who clearly articulate their organizational goals to their employees, communicate the collective mission of their organization, and talk about the organizational values explicitly (Afshari, 2022). As a role model, they must embody these ideals, behaving true to their voiced mission whilst also behaving for the common good of the group and organization. The connection between working in alignment with the vision of the organization and behaving in the best interest of oneself must be clearly made. There is a level of mutual respect and acknowledgement that is required to achieve idealized influence, in which the leader comprehends the behaviors of followers and thus instills pride in them for being associated with a charismatic leader (Khan, I.U. et al., 2022). The followers must in return observe and conclude for themselves that their leader is “doing the right thing” and through this deduction solidify their respect.

Dental staff/assistants/hygienists can form respect for the dentist as they observe how the dentist interacts not only with the patients, but also with them. In dentistry, the goal of the clinic is to provide optimal dental care and services, thus the basis of their establishment is service-oriented. When the dentist enters the work atmosphere with a positive attitude, providing consistent focus, interactions and care toward their patients, the dental staff can follow in their footsteps. Dentists can set the precedent by taking on the actions they wish to see within their clinic; this can be as simple as always showing up to work on time, to providing the uptmost level of care and accessibility for their patients. Dental staff can be moved by the detail-oriented care that dentists put into their work, and thus define this as the norm and the expectation that they too must hold themselves to. Coming to this conclusion on one’s own accord is more
effective and long-lasting than having it be forced on them through strict supervision and authoritarian control. This can thus blossom into strengthened inspirational motivation, and ultimately into job satisfaction and work performance.

**Inspirational motivation**

Inspirational motivation is based on the concept of transformational leaders behaving in ways that motivate and inspire their followers by providing meaning and challenge to their work (Bass & Riggio, 2006). It is in the role of the leader to encourage their followers to go the extra mile and pursue more than what was required and expected of them. This feat needs to be a self-motivated task, one where the individual wants and will pursue actions and behaviors that further the betterment of the organization as a whole, all on their own accord.

Now that the dentist has earned the respect of their staff, they hold greater influence, and thus their staff are more likely to embody and work to pursue this collective vision because of the newfound pride and connection they feel to their leader. In a sense, inspirational motivation can be defined as enthusiasm. As the dentist and staff now share a futuristic vision and are aware of the influence they hold in providing dental care to their community, there is a sense of passion that they feed one another and grow together on. A dentist’s positive outlook will extend out to their staff, who can take that enthusiasm and translate it into more engaged and high-quality work. This in turn will provide further positive reinforcement to the dentist and continues this cycle of building internal motivation. In dental care, the expectation may look like simply providing the necessary care and treatment services to the patients, whereas taking the extra step may manifest in building authentic interactions with the patients, such as asking how the
tournament they mentioned during their last visit had went, how their family is doing, or even whether their college applications are progressing smoothly.

In theory, evoking passion and self-motivation to pursue more seems simple, but in reality, it requires the right environment. Motivation can only grow in a supportive and positive environment, where individuals feel safe taking risks and making mistakes, understanding that it is all part of the learning and growth process. Leaders can aid in this development through verbal encouragement and the occasional incentives/rewards. When individuals feel valued and feel that their work is acknowledged and praised, they gain confidence and the inspiration to continue to put in the effort for more recognition.

The dentist must work to not just communicate the vision with passion and rigor, but also articulate that the futuristic vision they see involves the dental staff. The dentist should work to voice the potential they see in their staff, and how they feel it would positively impact the advancement of their organization. This may look like stating,

“I believe in you and your skills, even if you may not in yourself at this moment”
“I will help you find your strengths and guide you to become the best version of yourself”
“I’m so excited to see your growth as well as the future of our clinic.”

This can help to reinforce self-confidence and respect, aiding the staff in building empowerment for themselves while also finding a collective identity with the clinic and their occupation. When the dentist maintains a combination of idealized influence and inspirational motivation, they promote intellectual stimulation within the staff, urging them to continuously challenge themselves and reflect on how they can grow and improve. This is fostered through the
understanding that their personal development will positively reflect in their clinic/organization, pushing them in a direction that is in the best interest of the collective whole and thus a pursuit that they want and are willing to strive toward.

**Intellectual stimulation**

Inspiration stimulates newfound motivation to pursue beyond what is required, and transformational leaders can further promote their followers’ efforts to be innovative by building on their ideas, encouraging different perspectives and new approaches: promoting a safe and supportive environment where mistakes are not criticized and creativity is encouraged (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

As to be expected within a dental practice, or any healthcare setting, there exists a large amount of governmental and regulatory body legislation that must be followed (Modha, 2020). Likewise, there are a large number of fixed in-house rules, regulations and policies that all the dental practice’s workers must abide by, and consequently, creativity is not often encouraged (Modha, 2020). Thus, rather than creativity, dentists can encourage a voice within their team.

Intellectual stimulation within healthcare can be defined as posing the question: what can we do better? Dentists can urge their staff to find ways they can reflect and improve: how they present themselves to their patients, how they communicate and guide them through procedures, and how they deliver the treatments. Much of this can be initiated through leading by example, tapping into idealized influence. Here we identify overlap and a level of progression across the four I’s. When the dentist embraces idealized influence, such as placing importance on building authentic interactions, they earn respect and in turn encourage intellectual stimulation. Dental staff will observe these authentic interactions, watch the influence it has on the patients, and
come to reflect on their own attitudes and approaches, drawing comparisons and determining if certain personal changes need to be made.

The dentist can further motivate intellectual stimulation within their dental team by maintaining a supportive environment in which feedback can be suggested and received in a positive manner. If strong inspirational motivation is upheld, a state in which dental staff are self-motivated and yearn to pursue the best version of themselves and for the betterment of the clinic as a whole, feedback will only act as a supplement. The dentist must foster this mindset as a normality within their clinic by remaining open-minded and non-defensive in the face of feedback, and furthermore, must make an active effort to apply the suggestions of their staff. By portraying behaviors of flexibility and adaptability, dentists not only promote their idealized influence, but also promote an atmosphere where dental staff aren’t afraid to voice their own opinions and share their concerns or ideas of improvement. This circles back to intellectual stimulation, where staff are willing to discuss change and welcome it.

Another approach is one where the dentist conducts daily meetings prior to opening their clinic. This can serve as a moment where individuals can voice concerns or suggestions for improving the patient experience, or even to ensure that everyone is on the same page in regards to how many patients they will intake that particular day, or a simple reminder of the clinic’s values and expectations.

**Individualized consideration**

To wrap all these components together, it is imperative that the transformational leader pay attention to each individual follower’s needs, working alongside their achievements and growth through close mentoring and guidance (Bass & Riggio, 2006).
This individualized consideration can manifest in the leader’s genuine efforts to build authentic relations with their followers, supplemented with trust and empathy, as they strive to identify individual strengths and values. In such an approach, it is important for the leader to implement a followership mindset, trusting and recognizing that everyone has something to contribute to the table. On the part of the leader, this requires a high level of self-awareness. Leaders need to be in tune with not only their capabilities and leading styles, but also their ability to identify when their followers are falling behind, or in need of a guiding hand. The foundation of individualized consideration is built on embracing the idea that every follower is a unique individual with their own perspectives, values, and work ethics. A leader must be willing to pay attention to the differences among their followers and discover what motivates and “what works” for each individual: a process that allows leaders to become more familiar with their followers, and enhances their overall communication (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

In dentistry, the focus of achieving individualized consideration can often be lost in the patient-centric approach, however, the component’s application onto the dental staff/assistant/hygienist is equally important to examine. The effort of the dentist to prioritize the individual values, strengths and work ethics of each of their dental staff will serve as the glue that holds the positive effects of the three previously identified components. Individualized consideration taps into creating an authentic partnership that elevates the leadership style into one of transformational ideals. One could argue that individualized consideration is the key aspect that distinguishes transformational leadership, promoting that furthered growth and development of the employee. Then, how can a dentist go about implementing this?

As mentioned earlier, a dentist must be keen on the personal values and skill sets of their staff, but trust must first be established to ensure organic individualized consideration. When a
dentist builds a supportive work environment, they encourage intellectual stimulation, where their staff feel comfortable asking for help and voicing concerns or suggestions; they feel safe being themselves. Facilitating this work culture as the norm allows for the dentist to observe how their staff excels in their work.

A dentist implementing individualized consideration may manifest in defining each staff member’s values, learning styles and work ethics. For example, one dental hygienist may be a single mother who prefers flexible work schedules and a more hands-off leadership style, whereas another dental assistant may prefer early scheduling notices and a more structured and highly supervised leadership style. In this scenario, one leadership style does not satisfy both followers, rather aligning a leadership style to one may negatively impact the other. Thus, it is imperative that the dentist quickly identifies these differences in values and priorities and as a result tailor their approach to each individual. This may look like the dentist maintaining clear communication to both staff members, ensuring that both their expectations are met and thus allowing them the resources and environment in which they can excel and provide high-quality dental care, all while also balancing their familial and personal responsibilities. Dental staff then develop a new perception of their leader: a highly attentive leader who prioritizes the development of their staff, and provides them the means to achieve their best selves. This further boosts dental staff’s confidence and team morale, advancing collective drive and growth.

Transformational leadership is a mutual transformational process; the leader builds respect and trust with their followers and thus provides them the skills to transform beyond what is expected of them. As followers grow and develop, their perceptions of their leader’s behaviors will also change, and given the authentic relationship pre-built between the two, ideal followers will communicate with their leaders to promote a paralleled growth alongside them. Up close,
one can see the detailed changes followers and leaders have on one another in various aspects, following the 4I’s or not, but in seeing the bigger picture, we see a shared growth, unified alongside one another.
Chapter 3

Transformational Leadership Applied on Dental Staff

In discussion of leadership, followership cannot be left out. Followership reverses the lens, looking at the influence followers have on their leaders, and focuses on their interactive and supportive role in shaping the leadership relationship (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). Transformational leadership is built upon establishing trust and intrinsic motivation in the relationship between employees and the organization, promoting development toward the collective greater good. The previously elaborated four components, however, are predominantly leader-oriented, focusing on leader behaviors and thus their influence on the followers; however, if followers are unwilling to comply with these efforts of the leader, the effectiveness of this motivational leadership style is lost. Thus, in defining and achieving transformational leadership, a lens of followership is required.

Kelley (1992, 2008) defines an “exemplary follower” as an individual who is high in critical thinking, provides constructive criticism, challenges leaders’ decisions and does not follow blindly. A highly active and engaged follower will further enhance leaders’ self-confidence and motivation to self-sacrifice and empower the development of collectivity and charismatic-inspirational leadership (Hollander, 1992). But most importantly, such “ideal followers” stimulate leaders’ thinking and shape leaders’ behavior (Khan et al., 2020). Notice the two-way street thinking to this approach. There is a cycle of influence in which the leader bestows their 4I’s onto their followers, and in the process followers build trust and respect for their leader. This further develops into the follower’s desire to see a furthered good of their organization, and thus they will act in ways that push their leader to become improved and better. A more self-aware and authentic leader who is in connection with their followers will cycle back
into providing improved idealized influence back onto the followers. There is a sense of positive feedback identified within this interaction, where transformational leaders are being modified and built on their follower’s perceptions, behaviors and responses. In other words, the continued preservation of these transformational leader qualities are all up to the followers. The leader can only do so much in promoting self-motivation and drive for the bettering of the organization, thus highlighting the importance of developing highly active and engaged followers. These behaviors of “exemplary followers” can be defined through voice behavior.

Voice behavior is defined as the communication of employee wisdom on suggestions, ideas and concerns in the workplace with a view in improving organizational functions (Adhyke et al., 2023). Within voice behavior, voice has been categorized into two types: promotive and prohibitive. Promotive voice aims to improve organizational functioning through the act of putting forward innovative ideas and suggestions, whereas prohibitive voice attempts to prevent organizational failures by expressing concerns and worries (Song et al., 2020). Both types of voice behaviors can be identified within an “exemplary follower” and can be further developed alongside transformational leadership, particularly through a pygmalion approach. Bass & Riggio (2006) describe the pygmalion effect as the act of holding and subtly communicating high performance expectations for followers. This in turn has been demonstrated to positively influence followers’ performance as it raises self-efficacy in followers, instilling in them the idea that they can perform up to the high expectations that are set and communicated by the leader, and that the leader will help to support and ensure that the followers have the means to do it (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Meaningful work is another necessary component, defined as the perception that one’s work is of value and contributes to a greater positive outcome. The combination of self-efficacy and meaningful work has been studied to produce improved
attitudes and job satisfaction within a workplace, leading to high-quality work productivity and successful outcomes (Song et al., 2020).

In the context of a dental practice, you’ll often see the dentist and dental hygienist/assistant working collaboratively: the passing back and forth of dental tools, the dentist working on filling a cavity while the dental hygienist keeps the area dry with a suction and air syringe, etc. The fluid interaction the two share is integral in providing optimal treatment care for their patient. In general dentistry, the dental hygienist/assistant is the first to see the patient, asking about their discomforts, referencing any previous conditions or issues that need extra attention from the dentist, and conducting general cleaning procedures. At this moment, they are the face of the clinic, embodying the core values of the clinic and acting as the leader in forming trust and reliance with the patient. Thus, it is imperative that the dentist has established idealized influence and inspirational motivation within their staff, ensuring that they are on the same page about the ideal approach to patient interactions. Moreover, the dental assistants have a higher frequency of interactions with their patients than the dentists, thus they will most likely have a better holistic understanding of the progression of a patient’s condition. They will have had conversations about health conditions or backstories to certain discomforts, and specific concerns or personal issues that the patients may have. Dental assistants will have knowledge of the patient’s background that can’t be identified simply from their x-rays or check-ups. Thus, the communication between the dental assistants and the dentist is crucial. The clear collaborations in regards to treatment plans and procedures between the dentist and dental assistants ensures that the information being communicated to the patient remains consistent, preventing frustrated providers and confused patients. This in turn can greatly secure trust and patient treatment
acceptance, necessary factors to the success of a dental clinic, or any medical setting for that regard.

When dentists actively reach out to their dental assistants for their opinion on specific patients, and work alongside them to devise a treatment plan, dental assistants will feel a greater sense of belonging and value to the clinic. This encourages dental staff to become more engaged in their work and thus partake in voice behavior. Dental staff embodying voice behavior exhibit a high degree of trust and understanding of their dentist, thus feeling more comfortable communicating their thoughts freely and openly without fear of misinterpretation or judgement. As mentioned earlier, this can be further augmented with the pygmalion effect, where the dentist verbally communicates positive expectations to their staff, instilling budding confidence and pinpointing their potential. Notice how in effectively implementing a pygmalion approach, the dentist needs to have established individualized consideration: the understanding that each individual has different needs and skill sets, and identified how to best orient their leadership to accentuate strengths and improve the weaknesses. As the dentist continues to build self-efficacy within their staff, this positive attitude translates into their work, also known as meaningful work. Steger et al. (2012) conceptualizes meaningful work as consisting of three main facets: positive meaning in work; meaning-making through work; and greater-good motivation, the desire to positively contribute to the greater good instead of focusing on themselves. We humans are simple, if we find work that compliments our interests and evoke the belief that we are making positive contributions to those around us, or others in general, we conclude that the work has value in our lives. We find a new sense of self-pride and worth, and thus become more committed to continuing what makes us feel this way. Dentists can help to plant this initial feeling of worth and dignity within their staff and allow this growth of identity to maintain
satisfaction and thus greater work productivity/outcomes. This may look like the dentist explicitly communicating the positive impact their work has been having on their community, evaluating the number of new patients their clinic has received, the high percent of patient retention, positive comments and feedback they have received from their patients, etc. When dental staff are made aware of the positive influence of their work and are acknowledged for it, they become self-motivated to continue to uphold these expectations and outcomes. There is a new desire and willingness to pursue past what is expected, thus achieving the essence of transformational leadership.

The establishment of voice behavior, meaningful work, and the general perception and acknowledgement of the dental staff’s value in the future of the dental clinic will transfer into higher levels of commitment toward their patients. When dental assistants and hygienists feel a sense of inclusivity and belonging within their place of work, and have built a relationship of acknowledgement and trust with their dentist, they will feel more committed to their work and in turn provide an elevated quality of service and interaction with their patients. Furthermore, studies have identified a significant relationship between job satisfaction and job retention. Given the importance of the cohesive nature between a dentist and their assistant, it is integral that this relationship is continued with the same individual. When dental assistants/hygienists retain their job position, there is greater opportunity to further build the authentic relationship with the dentist; however, if a clinic were to see the frequent changing of dental assistants and staff, there would be a lack of cohesion and development of a team environment. With high retention rates of dental staff, a dentist will not have to concern themselves with onboarding new dental assistants, and instead devote their full attention to providing high quality care and treatment to their patients, and continuing to familiarize themselves with their current staff,
furthering their development and accentuating their transformational leadership qualities. Dental staff would also feel the influence in their team and work environment as they grow comfortable and close to their team members, building that supportive network and further improving voice behavior. When there are frequent changes in staff, they will feel no need to put in the effort to develop and build genuine interactions; further, a norm of high turnover, rate of employees quitting, will formulate within the work environment. Ideally, the dental staff’s individual perception of their value and meaningfulness of their work will expand to influence the dynamic of the staff as a whole, which in hindsight can impact the leadership of a dentist and the success of the dental clinic.

These positive perceptions of meaningful work, voice behavior, and built sense of belonging and acknowledgement - which for the sake of simplicity we will categorize as job satisfaction - also tie over into the concept of self-sufficiency. This is integral to maintaining a successful practice. A dental clinic is a systematic process, a business, and while the dentist is the leader, they cannot handle the workings of the clinic all on their own. When the dental staff has established and maintains job satisfaction, they will drive themselves and each other in upholding the values and mission of the clinic. Thus, the dentist will not have to micromanage and supervise their every move, trusting that the staff is providing optimal care to the patients, even out of the vision and guidance of the dentist themselves. This circles back to the points made earlier, the cycle of influence between the leader and the followers, the dentist and the dental staff, respectively. When the followers are trusting of their leader, their leader will also build mutual trust for their followers, a process that is self-maintained and only further supplements one another over time. The dental assistants and hygienists are the first to interact and establish that positive first impression with the patient, in that moment embodying the
dentist and the clinic’s values. Thus, in closing, the essence and effectiveness of transformational leadership lies in the harmonious interactions between the leader and the follower. In application, the dentist must also encourage their dental staff to be confident in their skills and judgement, and build the appropriate work environment to augment these self-perceptions and self-motivations to create an effective dental clinic.
Chapter 4
Transformational Leadership on Patients

Transformational leadership requires a partnership between the leader and their followers, and through that process convey the efficiency and effectiveness of the product to their customers. In dentistry, the “customers” are the patients. The patients are at the top of the pyramid and are the sole focus for wellbeing and quality of service. As with any workplace sector, if there are no loyal customers, or a general lack of a consumer base, there can be no company. Recalling from previous sections, leadership requires followership; a leader cannot be defined or maintained without their followers. Within the context of dentistry, the term “followers” encompasses the dental staff as well as the patients. The dentist leads their dental staff through an established professional coherence, “transforming” them into leaders of their own as they, together, lead their patients through dental procedures and treatments. The dentist can promote a supportive and safe work environment where dental staff feel valued and confident, and jointly ensure a normality of patient safety and quality care. In the process, they institute a harmonious coordination that can be felt by the patients, and thus sustain trust and ease dental anxiety.

Patient safety culture is defined as the product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behavior that determine the commitment to and proficiency of an organization’s health and safety management (Ree & Wiig, 2019). Ree & Wiig (2019) studied the associations between transformational leadership, job demands, job resources, work engagement, and patient safety culture. As established in earlier contexts, when the leader is able to organize and convey a sound work environment in which work values, job demands, and resources are balanced, there is a positive effect on their employee’s work engagement and
perception of meaningfulness. In theory, this influence carries onto the clientele. Ree & Wiig (2019) concluded a positive relationship of transformational leadership, job resources and work engagement to patient safety culture, and a negative relationship of job demands to it. These results were in support of current literature and only further emphasizes the importance of embodying effective transformational leadership in healthcare sectors to promote quality of work and care. In this study, there was a particular focus on the dentist providing better care for their patient base through their dental staff by emphasizing changes to their work environment and conditions, however, it is also important to consider the dentist’s immediate influence through their direct interactions with their patients.

Personalized dental care ensures that patients are receiving tailored solutions that address their individual oral health needs and concerns. On the part of the dentist, it requires them to prioritize listening and understanding their patients to gain insight into their preferences and develop more targeted treatments and interventions. This is familiar and is seen in the interactions between the dentist and their dental staff as they implement individualized consideration. The two terms can almost be used interchangeably, the base value of care and approach customized to each patient recalled in both individualized consideration and personalized care. When these qualities are established, dentists can foster a deeper level of trust and rapport with their patients as they feel heard and supported. Dentists can further this sense of mutual respect and care through idealized influence and inspirational motivation, in which they relay their treatment recommendations and put the follower patient at the center of the decision making process, empowering them to take an active role in improving their oral health. In connection to the relationship between dentist and dental staff, this is similar to the behaviors of
a highly engaged “exemplary” follower. Moreover, the benefits of encouraging an active dental staff can also be found in patients in the form of patient compliance.

Patient compliance is described as the patient’s adherence to following the treatment guidelines as well as the good oral health behaviors as recommended by the dentist. We often hear this through the frequent reminders to brush our tongue and floss daily. Patient compliance is important not just for the follower patient, but also for the dental professional. When patient compliance is established, this allows for dentists to better apply their skills and be of better service as they know that their treatment plan will be followed and met. This provides for a more well-organized and efficient dental care approach that ensures that patients receive timely dental interventions and preventative measures while also respecting the dentist’s time and effort. In essence, high quality dental care requires effort from both parties: the dentist and patient must meet each other halfway. When the dentist develops their transformational leadership components, they encourage follower patients who are well-informed and actively engaged in the decisions behind certain treatment plans; when this is supplemented with an empathetic approach, dentists promote a relaxed environment where patients then feel comfortable voicing concerns about their personal oral health or recurring issues, and thus comply with any provided recommendations. For example, when an orthodontist formulates a personalized invisalign plan for the teeth of their patient, a successful outcome can only be achieved if the patient wears their retainers consistently and stays away from sticky/hard foods that could damage their brackets. However, for this adherence to be maintained, the patient needs to trust their dentist’s skills and vision in the aesthetics of their teeth. Moving and straightening teeth is a long term process, and thus immediate results may not be explicitly visible for the patients. Thus, the dentist must convince the patient to continue to comply with their treatment by seeing the greater vision
through a built trust. This is where emotional intelligence is especially important, as the dentist can then communicate and make sure to approach their patients with authenticity, and bring them into the conversation of their treatment plan, communicating in all transparency, ensuring the patient and family are well aware and familiar with certain procedures, and even being open about insurance and financial outcomes, thus facilitating growth of trust between the pair.

When a dentist prioritizes patient comfort and is able to establish and maintain positive relationships with their patients, they will see improved oral health outcomes in patients as well as successful results in their business. Patients who comply with their treatments will also adopt better oral hygiene practices and maintain regular check ups and thus allow opportunities for dentists to detect and identify potential risks earlier on. When patients are more open to discussing their personal concerns, dentists can formulate more targeted interventions and optimize treatment plans that reduce any likelihood of ineffective or unnecessary procedures. When results are ideal and meet the patient’s satisfaction, they are more likely to uphold their end of the stick, adhering to long-term dental care and committing to consistent checkups. This poses a win-win situation in which the patient sees improved oral health and overall well-being and the dentist sees higher patient retention and a successful growing dental business.
Chapter 5

Implications of Implementing Transformational Leadership in Dentistry

From the moment you are greeted by the receptionist at the front desk to when you sit in the reclining dental chair, the workings of a dental clinic are all systematic. While its smooth progression is established and maintained by the dentist, it cannot be efficiently upheld by the dentist alone, it requires a collaborative effort. Transformational leadership and personalized dental care go hand in hand, its core values focused on achieving a set goal through interpersonal relations and empowerment built on authenticity and self-drive. When a dentist successfully embodies these four components of transformational leadership, they can most effectively employ a supportive work environment that provides high quality dental care for their patients.

Given all these theoreticals and the positive influence it holds, where can a dentist start? The personal development path to becoming an ideal leader requires self-reflection and self-awareness, and stems from a deeper understanding of how you react and approach various situations, identifying styles of leadership you thrive under, qualities you define as strengths and areas of improvement, and may also require drawing from past leadership experiences, or additional guidance through a mentor. As shown, it is a lengthy process that is continuously changing and evolving through new experiences, new positions, and new people. Thus, the concept must be planted early on; within dentists this can be achieved through offering leadership classes in dental school. The focus of dental school is in building the biological knowledge and dexterity skills necessary to becoming a successful dentist, and while important, the business and patient-interactive aspects of the field must also be considered. In the leadership courses, dental students can become familiar with various leadership styles and its application in different fields and sectors of life, not just limited to healthcare. Equipped with this knowledge,
they can apply leadership styles that they find most compatible with their values, and perspectives of what they define as ideal dental care. Leadership is as personalized and tailored to an individual as dental care is, and thus the four years of dental education that a dental student goes through provides the perfect opportunity to identify personal leadership styles and qualities, as well as build and implement them under the guidance of fellow dental students and mentors.
References


