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Where do we go from here?

New Year is traditionally a time for re-evaluating your resolutions and making new ones. In many cases these resolutions are things we would like to achieve in the year ahead, much like the setting of objectives for our career or practice. Yet very few people spend time in setting themselves clear written objectives. I suspect the reason for this, apart from the scarcity of knowledge on management that is still prevalent in healthcare professionals, is that objectives can only be set when you have a clear idea of your ultimate destination for yourself or your practice. In management jargon this is known as a mission statement, a much-abused and misunderstood concept.

In essence a mission statement is simply a statement that tells you and any others working with you what you are trying to achieve, ideally in a single sentence. It should be clear, short, understandable and memorable. It does not need to be fully comprehensive, but it does need to encapsulate the essence of where you are going (or more simply, as I said earlier, what you are trying to achieve).

Probably the most famous mission statement on television belongs to the Starship Enterprise. Mention the split infinitive, and everyone remembers that Captain Kirk and his crew are 'boldly going where no man has gone before, to seek out new life ...etc'. Another famous mission statement in the 1960s was the US resolution to 'put a man on the moon, and bring him back safely, by the end of the decade.' Alas, these excellent mission statements are the exception, and the very term itself has become demeaned by many mission statements that are long-winded, incomprehensible and definitely forgettable. Often, the larger the organisation the worse the mission statement.

The other problem with mission statements is that they can be written in good faith but do not reflect what the organisation (or individual) really wants. A common example in general practice is the statement 'To provide quality dentistry in a relaxed and friendly environment' which is not only fairly meaningless (what does it really mean?) but lacks any real passion or

desire. The NASA mission statement of putting a man on the moon was clear - the United States really wanted to do just that. The statement had vision. We knew what it meant and we also knew they passionately wanted to achieve it. As we all know, they did.

All of the above brings me to the point of this leader - I believe that most dentists have difficulty in identifying what they really want in their career or with their practice. I know that I did when I was in practice myself. I had a hazy idea which became more focused as I developed, but I never set myself clear objectives for my practice at all - in fact the idea just never occurred to me. As a result I would have been in danger of doing what many people do, drifting through my professional life without a direction, perhaps ending up where I never thought I would, and feeling slightly dissatisfied with it all but never quite knowing why.

The real problem with setting a mission statement and a set of objectives is not the process itself. It is the real difficulty of knowing what you want in the first place. Deciding what you want is not easy. Many of us have barriers thrown in our paths from an early age by well-meaning friends and relatives who do not wish us to be disappointed. As a result we 'learn' or believe that we cannot really have what we truly want, and so we never try. The other problem is we may try to please others (such as spouses, friends, parents or staff) rather than do things simply for ourselves. We end up by doing things to achieve what we think others want for us, and lack the real desire required to make it all work.

Once you do know what you want then business planning is essential in order to achieve it. A clear idea of your direction (the mission statement) and your plan (your strategic objectives) not only clarify things in your own mind, but also communicate it clearly to those helping you achieve it - your staff. It tells everyone exactly where you (and your practice) are going. Somehow, it puts those New Year Resolutions in a different light, doesn't it?

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