Leadership in dentistry

Creating a leadership culture is essential for a sustainable future in dentistry, says **Fiona Ellwood**.¹

Leadership is not a new concept in dentistry, yet research and literature are sparse within dentistry;¹ this does not appear to be the case within healthcare in general. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of leadership position within dentistry based upon a small-scale research study and to contextualise leadership as a potential agent of change in the current climate.

A small-scale research study was presented as an additional specialist pathway (Leadership and Management), to the Master's in Education

programme in 2016. The methodological approach and orientation were very much seated within the qualitative inquiry and an inductive approach, the philosophical approach being phenomenology.

More to the point is the obvious need to capture the concept and notion of leadership with the intention of opening minds to leadership, supporting those in leadership roles, bringing further explanation and understanding from a theoretical context, to apply it in practice. What should be considered is that leadership sits within and across the team and at differing levels and relates to both clinical and non-clinical team members. What was not apparent from the research study was the number of dental professionals who invest valuable time in leadership activity.

In summary, the research findings painted an interesting picture that warrants sharing:

- Multiple variations of meaning relating to leadership, leader and leading from all dental professionals were evident
- Mixed impressions of leadership being either a trait or being taught
- Confusion of language and understanding in relation to leadership *versus* management
- Many were under the impression that only those in senior positions could be identified as a leader and participating in leadership activities, despite engaging in leadership activity themselves
- Some believed leadership should be part of the primary curriculum, whilst others believed that it was a given that becoming a leader and having leadership skills were

expected, especially if you were a general dental practitioner and potential practice owner

- Leadership was seen as a medium of change, but by whom became a complex issue.

This is why we need to dispel the myths around leadership and why more time and resources should be invested, after all 'the very essence of leadership is that you have to have vision, you can't blow an uncertain trumpet'.²

There are many definitions of leadership³ and with them come various levels of complexity. What is clear is that leadership is different to management, yet many utilise the language interchangeably. For clarity and the purpose of this short paper with a strong focus on leadership: leadership is simply defined as seeking change and being visionary⁴ and doing the right thing. Management on the other hand is in simple terms defined as maintaining the *status quo* and establishing order.⁵ A further debate worthy of additional discussion is leadership as a trait, an ability, a skill and a behaviour,⁶ but this is beyond the remit of this paper. Importantly, some believe leadership can be taught and gained.⁷

What follows demonstrates leadership in more modern times and it makes clear how all members of the team can be engaged in leadership activity, no matter which professional dental registrable group they belong to.

At this point it is worth considering the three common styles of leadership and influence (Fig. 1).⁸

Author information

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Leader influence

Leadership can also be paternalistic, but in general when it comes to leadership models they are considered as either hierarchical⁵ or flat⁵ and either task-oriented or relationship-orientated. Commonly identified as being task-orientated is associated with goal accomplishment and relationship-orientated is more about helping followers feel better about situations, themselves, and others.

When focusing on leadership types, the following list is helpful but not exhaustive:⁸

- Transformational
- Transactional
- Invitational
- Situational
- Authentic
- Distributed
- Adaptive
- Team
- Servant.

A further consideration is the difference between appointed leadership and emergent leadership and the plethora of theories surrounding leadership ie contingency theory and path-goal theory. The conceptual skills of leadership are identified as problem solving, strategic planning and creating vision. Whichever skill is being applied there is great benefit in establishing ethical leadership practice,⁹ notably as a General Dental Council registrant this should be a given.

Like any field there are common mistakes made and they are worth considering:⁵

- Not sharing a common vision
- Failing to define goals
- Not delegating
- Misunderstanding motivation
- Failing to provide feedback
- Not 'walking the walk'
- Not making time for your team
- Being too hands-off
- Being too friendly
- A mismatch of approach and situation
- Not considering the infrastructure of the group.

Adapted from Mindtools 2021¹⁰

In this paper there has been some focus on the leaders themselves and although it is beyond their remit to unpick this component more, it is worth investigating.

In conclusion, I go back to the small-scale research undertaken in 2016 as part of a Master's programme: leadership can be part of any team member's role no matter what to which registrable group they belong or what their role is. A word of warning is not to confuse leadership and management, we know now there are distinct differences.

Fig. 1 The three common styles of leadership and influence

'I would urge anyone interested in teams, team working and dimensions of the team, to consider a course by a reputable provider in leadership'

Creating a leadership culture is essential for a sustainable future in dentistry.¹¹ I would urge anyone interested in teams, team working and dimensions of the team, to consider a course by a reputable provider and awarding body in leadership, you may well make very different decisions as a result of this.

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