

# Dentistry by Design

An effective organizational design is vital to the success and sustainability of any dental practice. The organizational design emanates from the dentist's vision and thus determines the probability that the vision will be realized. Just as the examination, diagnosis, and treatment plan optimize the ability to achieve the desired restorative outcomes, your organizational design shapes and guides team efforts toward the intended clinical, business, and relationship outcomes. Without a strategically designed organizational plan in place to support and direct team behavior, the essential task of creating the practice vision becomes secondary to "putting out fires" each day.<sup>1,2</sup>

An organizational design does not need to be complex to be effective. The design goals for an average-size dental practice (four to 10 team members) are three-fold:

1. The design should emerge from the dentist's practice vision—the intended future of the practice;
2. The design should be flexible to be responsive to and facilitate positive change; and
3. The design should be simple and establish clear linkage between:
  - vision (the dentist's intended outcomes for the practice);
  - strategy (how the team will achieve intended outcomes);
  - people (individuals working to their strengths in best-fit roles); and
  - results (work outcomes that facilitate the vision).<sup>3-6</sup>

This article will discuss when organizational design or redesign is indicated for your practice, and present a three-step approach to creating and implementing effective *dentistry by design*.

## WHEN ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN IS INDICATED

Dental organizational design or redesign is indicated when environmental change (internal or external to the practice) alters practice functioning, and visionary outcomes are not being realized. Given that change is a natural occurrence, the dentist and the team's willingness to anticipate and plan for change increases the probability of practice sustainability and success. Organizational evaluation for design should be addressed routinely on an annual basis, and when the following indications are present:

1. You are setting up a new practice or building a new facility;
2. You are growing or reducing the size of your practice;
3. You are adding an associate or auxiliary to the practice;
4. A change occurs in your external environment, eg, the economy, patient demographics, third-party reimbursement relationships, referral patterns, etc; or
5. The practice is not meeting your expected financial, clinical, or technological outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

Change is an inherent part of practice life that cannot be controlled, but it

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### DDS Vision

The intended future of the practice

### Strategy

How the team will achieve the vision—intended future

### People

Individuals working to their strengths in best-fit roles

### Results

Work outcomes that facilitate the vision

can be planned for and managed. Knowing when and how to initiate organizational design or redesign enables you to quickly respond to, capitalize on, and leverage change to benefit you and your practice.

## A THREE-STEP APPROACH TO PRACTICE DESIGN

Practice vision is the most essential element of an effective organizational design. The practice vision is a clear and concise statement that communicates the dentist's intended future of the practice. While the responsibility of identifying the vision resides with the dentist as the leader, it is the collective responsibility of the dentist and the team to strategize how to best align the structure, capabilities, and people to achieve the vision.

### Step 1—Creating the Practice Vision

One of the most effective methods for developing a vision statement is to conduct a *gap assessment*, a survey that identifies the difference between one's observation of the *current state* vs the *desired state* of affairs.<sup>4,6</sup> The difference that exists between the current and the desired state of the practice is typically experienced by the dentist as stress

or motivation to find resolve, ie, take action to close the *gap*. When applied to developing a vision, the gap assessment focuses on the observable level of the practice. The following are examples of two gap assessment statements:

1. The current status of the clinical, technical, and financial aspects of the practice is:
2. I want the status of the clinical, technical, and financial aspects of the practice to be:

The gap assessment will reveal valuable information regarding the *differences* the dentist wants in the practice. Once the *differences* are clearly communicated by the dentist and understood by the team, a vision statement can be formalized and steps taken to initiate an organizational design for gap closure to achieve the vision. In the words of anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson, "*Information is the difference that makes a difference.*"<sup>7</sup>

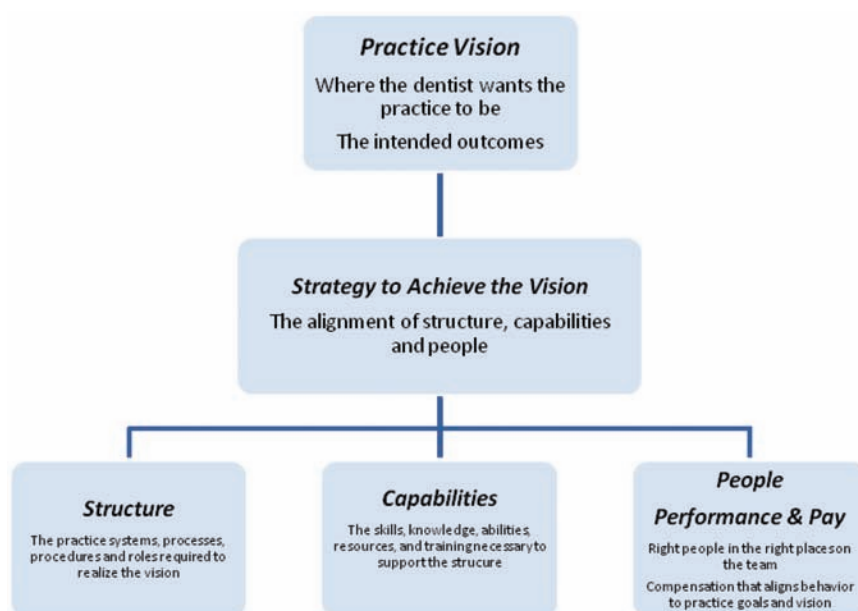
### Step 2—Strategizing to Close the "Gap"

The next step in the process of design is for the dentist and the team to strategize how they will get from where they are, to where they want to go. The

strategy phase requires gap assessments for each of three design components (*structure, capabilities, and people*) to determine each component's current ability to deliver on the vision and where strategy for redesign is indicated. The following are examples of gap assessment questions for the strategy phase of the design process:

1. **Structure:** How should the existing systems, procedures, and roles be modified to facilitate us in creating the practice vision?
2. **Capabilities:** What skills, knowledge, abilities, resources, and training are necessary to support our new structure? How will we attain the needed capabilities?
3. **People:** Do we need to reconfigure individual work roles so that everyone is working to their strengths? If so, whose role should change?<sup>4,8</sup>

Once the new structure is agreed on, job descriptions based on capabilities are revised, and each team member is working to their strengths in the appropriate roles, a performance management system (performance measures linked to compensation) can be implemented to support forward progress of the practice.<sup>6,9</sup>



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### Step 3—Design Implementation

The final step in the process is successful implementation of the new practice design. Successful implementation of your organizational design is dependent on each team member's decision to commit to achieving the intended visionary outcomes. It is essential that the dentist creates a positive and motivating context for design implementation. The following are guidelines for design implementation:

- A. Open the implementation discussion with your team by reviewing the rationale for the new design, and how the new design will facilitate their ability to achieve the practice goals and create the vision. Paint a verbal picture of how the new design will positively impact work efforts and the patient's experience in the practice.
- B. Use a gap assessment. Ask your team to imagine the new framework and supporting system in place, and how their experience of themselves will be different when they are able to optimize their skills, gifts, and talents.
- C. Then, explain to the team that design implementation is a 3- to 6-month process. Impress on the team that their feedback during the implementation process is encouraged and expected, and will influence the success of the design and the practice.
- D. Continue by scheduling bi-monthly team meetings for the first 3 months of the implementation process, and once a month thereafter, to discuss the design's effectiveness, ie, is the new practice design delivering the intended results—is the vision being realized?
- E. Use *open-ended questions* intended to elicit significant information.<sup>2</sup> For example:

- What has your experience been while putting the new design into action?
- In your observation, what aspects of the design are working or not working?
- What changes to the design need to occur for us to achieve the intended outcome goals/vision?

### FINAL COMMENTS

A brief historical review of dentistry indicates a continued bright future shaped by fast-paced change at the clinical, technical, business and marketing levels of practice. Maintaining a competitive edge in a market of savvy dental consumers with increasingly high clinical, technical, and relational expectations requires that the dentist and the team design their practice to respond to and optimize change. This article is intended to provide a methodology to develop a vision-based practice design that results in long-term clinical and business success and sustainability.

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