

Beyond Approval

The New Mindset of Modern Dental Leaders

In every thriving pediatric dental practice, the real difference-maker isn't just smarter scheduling, sleeker branding, or even rock-solid systems; it's a team of practice champions. Unfortunately, many practice leaders are exhausted from trying to make their team happy, hoping that will inspire loyalty and follow-through. However, instead of being supported by a team of aligned, mission-driven allies, many leaders find themselves constantly correcting mistakes, putting out emotional fires, and pushing initiatives uphill alone. And over time, that weight becomes unsustainable. In fact, many leaders unintentionally sabotage the practice growth efforts, not because they lack vision or passion, but because they do not trust their team to carry more.

For example, Dr. C., a talented pediatric dentist with a thriving patient base, recalled a recent team meeting that left her feeling drained, discouraged, and alone. "I'm doing everything I can to motivate my team," she said. "I buy lunch. I praise them and even sugar coat my feedback when they underperform, so I don't make anyone feel bad. I'm positive, even when I don't feel like it. I try to accommodate

their requests even if it inconveniences me. I am cautious not to nitpick. But they still talk behind my back, resist change, and seem disengaged. I'm tired of managing emotions. I want a team I can rely on, not a group of adults to babysit."

Pediatric dental teams typically possess a wealth of skills, but they often lack clarity, consistency, and shared ownership of the practice's mission. Most of the tension stems from leaders who seek the approval of their team rather than creating a team of strong, committed allies. When leaders seek approval from the team, it diminishes their ability to influence.

To make the shift from approval-seeker to ally-builder, pediatric dental leaders require more than just motivation; they need a clear framework to guide their thinking, leadership, and communication. That's where the C.A.R.E. Leadership System comes in.

The four pillars of C.A.R.E. provide a practical and powerful structure for developing leaders who no longer carry the burden of the practice mission alone but instead cultivate a team of practice

champions that carry the mission together. Each pillar supports the “leader shifts” necessary to build trust, create clarity, and drive performance through aligned action, rather than employee approval.

The silent saboteur of many leaders in pediatric dental offices is the desire to be liked more than a commitment to lead.

Leaders who embrace the C.A.R.E. Leadership system more easily:

- Align the team without micromanaging
- Create consistency without confusion
- Build ownership without burnout
- Drive excellence without emotional overload

When C.A.R.E. becomes the practice operating system, communication improves, turnover drops, and productivity increases. According to Gallup, “75 percent of turnover is preventable, mostly caused by poor communication and unclear expectations by leadership, not because of pay.”



THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL PILLARS OF THE C.A.R.E. LEADERSHIP SYSTEM

C – Clarify the Mission and Expectations

When teams lack clarity, they default to comfort and chaos. The leader must clearly define:

- What the practice stands for (vision and mission)
- How team members win daily (priorities and goals)
- What behaviors support or sabotage the mission of the practice (culture and values)

Leader Shift 1:

Never keep the practice mission or standards a secret. Open each week with one simple cultural anchor. For example: “In this practice, we solve problems, we don’t pass them on.” Or “We don’t wait to be asked, we fill in the gap.”

Leadership Truth:

Confusion is exhausting, while clarity is energizing. Unspoken expectations produce unpredictable results, whereas repetition fosters a competent team.

A – Ask for Alignment, Not Approval

When leaders chase approval, they lose authority. Many well-intentioned practice leaders water down expectations to avoid discomfort, soften standards to avoid conflict, and make decisions based on team happiness rather than the practice’s health. But in doing so, leaders trade long-term respect for short-term relief. Practice champions are built by seeking alignment through honesty, consistency, and shared purpose.

Approval feels good for the moment, but alignment builds a practice that is strong forever.

Leader Shift 2:

If the team is resisting a change, a practice leader can say: "This conversation may be uncomfortable, but I am committed to helping you reach your potential. The behavior we need to address is _____ because it does not align with our practice, mission, and values. After this conversation, I need you to improve _____. I am counting on you. Can you commit to this?"

Leadership Truth:

People resist unclear leaders. They follow courageous leaders who care enough to uphold the standard.

Brene Brown reminds us, "To be clear is to be kind."

R – Reinforce Accountability with Kindness

Nice leaders avoid discomfort, whereas kind leaders engage the team with care.

Too many practices operate with "nice silence," ignoring underperformance to avoid the emotional backlash that comes from holding others accountable to the standard.

Leader Shift 3:

Catch misalignment early and quickly reinforce the standard. Try using "kind correction" phrasing such as:

"This isn't who we are. Let's fix this before it becomes a problem." "I care too much to ignore this; we have a higher standard here." "What can we do to reset this together?"

Leadership Truth:

Practice culture is caught, not taught. According to The Harvard Business Review, "58% of employees say they trust strangers more than their own

boss." Ensure the team sees practice leaders embodying the core values and consistently living them out.

"Tough love is real love. Weak love lets people fail quietly." – Jon Gordon

E – Empower the Team to Lead Together

The most effective leaders don't carry the practice alone. When the team carries the mission, the practice becomes unstoppable. Great leaders train their teams to think, act, and serve like practice champions.

Leader Shift 4:

At morning huddles or end-of-day meetings, ask: "Who saw someone show up like a practice champion today?"

Leadership Truth:

Leaders must recognize and reinforce good behavior consistently with the team. When the mission becomes shared, accountability becomes natural, and momentum follows.

"The function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers." – Ralph Nader

Leadership is not about being liked. Leadership is about building something lasting and exceptional. Leadership without C.A.R.E. is inconsistent.

The key difference between a burned-out team and a thriving, championship-level culture is rooted in **The Four Foundational Pillars of the C.A.R.E. Leadership System.**

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A MESSAGE FOR NEW LEADERS STEPPING INTO A LEADERSHIP POSITION

Stepping into leadership, especially when leading former peers or friends, can feel awkward, intimidating, and emotionally tricky. It's normal to want to be liked and seek the team's approval. Encourage new leaders that the goal is not to manage friendships, but to build a team of mission-driven allies. When in doubt, speak with courage and care. If newly promoted leaders are struggling to help maintain the practice standards, encourage them to try saying, "I value our connection, however my role now is to lead the entire team with

fairness and focus. That means I won't always say what's easy. I will always say what supports our mission."

Leadership in a pediatric dental practice isn't about personality or position; it's about the daily decision to lead with C.A.R.E.

Whether leading as the doctor or stepping into a new role as a manager or coordinator, the path forward is the same: stop seeking approval and start building practice champions. C.A.R.E. is how scattered teams become united and how good practices become great.

"Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge."

Simon Sinek

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