

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

EUGENE L. GOTTLIEB, DDS

Self-Organization as Practice Management

The business and professional fields have been through so many management fads, it begins to appear that we are willing victims of a sect of management gurus who make a living writing variations on a theme. They deal with attitudes and platitudes, telling you what you should do without telling you how you should do it.

Have you heard the latest? It's called self-organization. The idea is that workers need to be freed from central planning and control so they can get the job done. In practice, management and workers agree on the mission and objectives of the company, and the workers are let loose to implement them. Visa and Monsanto are two of the best-known corporations signing on to the concept, although in Monsanto's case, the idea is modified slightly to apply to self-managed groups rather than individual workers.

Self-organization is being touted as the management method for the 21st century, but it is not a revolutionary or even new idea. It used to be called bottom-up management, in which the role of top management is to hire capable people, make sure they know what the job is, and give them the ownership of the job. Functioning in this way, the workers will presumably perform more effectively than if they were hampered by rules and regulations from above.

Peter Drucker, who is generally acknowledged as the father of modern management as an organized discipline, was not an advocate of bottom-up business organization, nor did he approve of worker participation in management. He did, however, espouse the idea that workers need to have knowledge of the job they are doing and how it fits into the successful delivery of the product or service that results from their labors. In his book, *The Practice of Management*, Drucker wrote that a manager sets objectives, organizes, motivates and communicates, establishes yardsticks, and develops people.

Under self-organization, the primary role of management is to provide the workers with information. The workers tell management what particular information they need. Even when employees own the business, however, they recognize that there is a necessity for management to coordinate the efforts of the workers and to keep all the gears intermeshing and running smoothly. When you get right down to it, publicly owned companies have always operated on the basis of self-organization. Stockholders—the owners—run the company through a board of directors who are not usually involved in day-to-day operations.

In orthodontics, the ultimate in self-organization would be one orthodontist and no employees. The orthodontist would be both management and worker, and the success of the practice would depend on organization of himself or herself. What makes the management of an orthodontic office different from that of a large corporation is that the orthodontist always remains part board of directors, part management, and part worker. As employees are added and tasks are delegated, the role of the orthodontist as worker diminishes. Perhaps management can be delegated when there is more to be managed and coordinated and there are more people to share in management. The orthodontist can then begin to focus on encouraging the self-organization of the employees.

Drucker believed that we are in an "age of transition", but he also believed that the past is prologue, and that the events that will determine the future have already happened. For orthodontists, that might mean that the recent advances in cell biology will eventually overtake current treatment techniques. It is less clear whether today's experiments in practice management will move orthodontists away from hands-on treatment and into the information-based management that Drucker described. Because orthodontic practices are multifaceted management enterprises, it remains to be determined how much management can be outsourced. If it works, and somebody wants to call it self-organization, so be it. □