

# MANAGEMENT & MARKETING

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*(Editor's Note: This quarterly JCO column is compiled by Contributing Editor Howard Iba. Every three months, Dr. Iba presents a successful approach or strategy for a particular aspect of practice management. Your suggestions for future topics or authors are welcome.)*

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With a sizable percentage of orthodontists entertaining the idea of selling a practice, taking on an associate or partner, or just slowing down, the subject of transition has become more topical than ever. Over the next few editions of this column, we will explore various aspects of transitions.

We begin with an article by David Gage, a psychologist who specializes in helping businesses establish good partnerships. The success of a partnership depends on many factors, but in Dr. Gage's view, the keys are similar values and compatible personalities.

A psychological assessment of the potential partners uses interviews and testing to obtain personality information that can be compared with norms for those instruments. Dr. Gage feels this eliminates much of the guesswork and establishes a more scientific and quantifiable basis on which to evaluate the potential for a good fit.

If you are considering a partnership, you may find that taking the extra step of hiring an experienced psychologist will increase your chances of a successful outcome.

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## Choosing the Right Partner

**C**hoosing a professional partner is one of the most important decisions you'll ever make. The quality of your relationship can influence how you feel about going to work in the morning and how well you sleep at night. Your choice of a partner will significantly affect your staff, too, and therefore the well-being of your practice. Last, but certainly not least, your choice of a partner will affect the lives and welfare of your patients.

## The High Cost of Failed Partnerships

Finding a partner with whom you can work well is critical for yet another reason: the high cost of a bad decision. A Cleveland oral surgeon recalls the dire consequences of a decision to add a third person to what was previously a successful two-person partnership: "After six weeks, it was more than obvious it was not going to work. There were major character flaws and problems that we hadn't picked up on—to the point where it was noticeable to our patient and referral population." Thanks to a strong contract and documentation of the third surgeon's shortcomings, the owner was eventually able to cure that mistake, but the effect on his practice was traumatic.

Some doctors who have lived through partnership disasters have no desire to ever get involved with a partner again. That's understandable, but without a partner, expanding a practice or making the transition to retirement can be much more difficult. Those who have never experienced a bad partnership may think that choosing the wrong partner is like choosing the wrong office manager, only a little worse. It's

actually a lot worse. For one thing, you cannot fire a partner. Unless the partnership was established with extreme care—typically not the case—the process of dissolution can take months or years and often involves litigation.

Staying in a bad partnership just to avoid the trauma of a break-up is not a good alternative. Patients can often detect subtle conflict between doctors who *should* be working as a team. They may hesitate to refer friends and family to the practice and decide to look for a more harmonious office themselves. The news that partners are not getting along eventually spreads into the professional community, damaging reputations and the bottom line of the practice.

Dental school does little to teach doctors about being partners. Does that mean that conflict is inevitable? Only if the partners were a bad match from the start. Careful partner selection is the key.

### Screening Candidates for Partnership

In the business world, partners often end up together through some coincidence. Professionals are usually much more selective. They cast a wide net and carefully consider multiple candidates. They inspect resumes and transcripts, check references, and conduct interviews. But they often fail to investigate and evaluate critical factors in the relationship because they don't know how to go about it.

The essential elements of a successful partnership are:

- A good fit between the personalities of the partners
- Similar values
- The ability to be team players
- Compatible goals
- Mutual trust

Carefully assessing these critical relationship elements, especially the first two—personalities and values—gives a practice owner a tremendous advantage when selecting a partner. Obtaining expert help to do this is smart practice management in three respects:

First, people are usually not very good at

describing their own personalities. It's human nature to build defenses around our most troublesome personality traits. An expert can not only bring those characteristics to light, but can do it in the least painful and most productive way.

Second, people often make the mistake of thinking that someone they like must share their values and have similar personality traits. An expert can illuminate the ways in which potential partners differ.

Third, in the courting stage of any relationship, people are trying to put their best foot forward. That means they are trying to put their worst foot backward, so that it goes unnoticed. Unless potential partners make a conscious effort to see through this courtship myopia, they can be in for some surprises later on.

Psychologists enjoy distinct advantages in assessing potential partnerships. They are trained to be objective, and they have no stake in the outcome. Psychologists are also trained in understanding the defense mechanisms that people employ, and in using assessment tools and interpreting the data they provide.

Traditional methods of assessment are based on the model of hiring an employee. But the intention to form a partnership calls for a complete *partnership assessment*, even when the partner candidate technically starts out as an employee. A partnership assessment looks at *all* the partners, not just the candidate. Rather than focusing on the qualities of the individuals, it zeroes in on how well suited they are to working together, using two primary tools—tests and interviews.

Almost invariably, candidates respond positively to the suggestion that they and the partners in the practice undergo testing. It's a high-stakes gamble for them as well as for the owners, just in a different way. They see the partnership assessment as a form of insurance that things will work out. As one candidate put it, "Of the different practices I was considering, his was the only one that mentioned anything like this. It said to me that he really cares."

Because personalities and values are the

two most crucial factors in determining whether a candidate and a practice owner are likely to develop a truly successful partnership, there are two fundamental questions that psychologists try to answer:

*1. Is there a good fit between the personalities of the prospective partners?*

Studies have demonstrated that while physical appearance governs our first impressions of people, personalities are what make living or working together day after day, year after year, either a joy or a nightmare. Psychologists have exhaustively studied what makes some personalities click and others come to blows. They put that knowledge to use everywhere from the locker rooms of professional sports teams to the boardrooms of multinational corporations.

People tend to respond to other people and to circumstances in predictable ways. Personality testing gives us that information. It also tells us what types of environments people are most comfortable in and what motivates them. We learn about probable strengths, possible weaknesses, and the defenses people have built up over a lifetime. Importantly, testing also tells us about whether—and specifically how—people’s behavior changes under stressful conditions in the workplace.

Accurately assessing anyone’s personality is never as simple as giving one test. As in dental research, multiple tests allow hypotheses to be compared and their validity judged. Taken together, such tests can provide a complete picture of each potential partner’s personality. In fact, the typical reaction from people when they read about themselves in this way is astonishment that they could be described so thoroughly and accurately.

The challenge then is to determine whether the personalities involved can work well together. Most candidates will fit well in *someone’s* practice, but any given candidate will work better with some owners and less well with others.

When a Spartanburg, South Carolina, orthodontist wanted to bring on a partner about two years ago as part of his transition to retire-

ment, he told the candidate he would feel more comfortable if they underwent a psychological evaluation. The candidate agreed it was a good idea. On one test, their scores were virtually identical in three of the four categories, but almost diametrically opposite in the other. The test identified the candidate as a “thinking” person and the orthodontist as a “feeling” person. That contrast, which in other circumstances could be a red flag, “works out great”, the orthodontist says, “because we need both of those in a practice. We’ve had a couple of instances come up where I feel real sorry for someone, but I shouldn’t,” and his new partner has provided a reality check. For his part, the new partner says the test raised his awareness that he must pay attention to his “feeling” side, even though he can’t duplicate the orthodontist’s personality.

When the Cleveland oral surgeon’s partner of 13 years eventually decided to retire, the surgeon knew he couldn’t afford to repeat their earlier, disastrous mistake. He and a prospective new partner had a partnership assessment performed. The result, almost six years later: they enjoy a solid and successful partnership.

*2. Are the prospective partners’ values similar?*

Values, the underpinnings of all major decisions, usually function just beyond our awareness. Even though values are difficult to assess, they are critically important to the long-term survival of all partnerships. Sooner or later, an issue will arise whose resolution will depend on the partners’ values. It might be over whether to fire an employee, or whether to invest personal capital to upgrade equipment. Regardless of the issue, if partners’ values are significantly different, something will eventually cause those differences to become apparent.

Trying to ascertain the values of another person without sophisticated tools is even more difficult than trying to decipher another person’s personality. People have a penchant for describing their values in terms they think others want to hear. Values are laden with what we call “social desirability”.

Psychologists determine a person’s values

with a test that requires rating how strongly the person subscribes to dozens of value statements. Rankings for the candidate and the existing partners are compared. As with personality testing, there are no wrong answers; what matters is how well the values match up.

### **Making the Decision**

When a psychologist combines the results of the various personality and values tests with the material gathered from interviews, a great deal of information on differences and similarities always emerges. Differences aren't necessarily bad. But it's also true that similarities aren't always good. In particular, some personality traits that may make for a good relationship in a social situation may be problematic at work—and vice versa.

It's the psychologist's responsibility to determine—relying on research, years of analyzing psychological profiles, and, ideally, extensive experience with partnerships—whether the pat-

terns that emerge from the data are likely to be harmful or beneficial in the long run.

The psychologist can provide much more than a simple “go/no go” recommendation. He or she can spot issues that are likely to arise in the future, given the personalities involved, and can suggest how to deal with those issues constructively. Orthodontic partners can use this detailed feedback to help understand each other, the culture of the office, and how they can enhance their personal interactions and professional success. Few professional relationships are picture-perfect. Knowing what to watch for and what to discuss ahead of time can go a long way toward eliminating surprises and ensuring a successful partnership.

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