We are who we choose to be.

By Dennis J. Tartakow, DMD, MEd, EdD, PhD, Editor in Chief

With the 21st Century well into its second decade, new scientific technology, industrial integration and greater knowledge and skills are essential in order to move forward. Even with all elements and factors already in place, IT and administrative staff members, faculty members and orthodontic educators must develop new skills as technology advances. For those individuals who are in, or have moved into, new careers in education, it is never without need for change, modification, training or learning new job skills. Career changes, such as from clinician to educator, must include reflection and reconsideration of attitudes and behaviors.

It’s a new ball game with new rules, policies and conditions. We must glean greater understanding in order to assess the requirements and develop a plan for greater educational growth. This requires a strategic development plan that includes many essential factors, i.e. critical decisions for future growth, development, expansion of institutions, supportive companies, etc.

The “renaissance orthodoxists” involved might have greater thought and consideration to experience future success in such a career change. In the educational milieu, this strategic development plan might serve as a tool for (a) exploration of goals, (b) determination of skill levels requiring different faculty expertise and (c) appreciation of faculty needs that have exploded since the computer age commenced.

Setting direction and planning are two separated activities. A necessary function of leadership is to produce change and set a new direction of that change. We must devote time and interest to such a strategic plan in order to (a) synchronize visions and aspirations, (b) provide a blueprint for a viable future to anticipate change and (c) hold constant the reason for being — the education of our students.

An assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are also important in order to develop a strategic development plan. Such assessments could provide valuable reflections and analyses for yielding priorities that will be essential and critical for future success; such priorities will allow progression to the next or higher level.

Historically, reduced recruitment and retention and increased faculty vacancies have been becoming emergent problems in orthodontic education since the early 1990s, impacting people, communities and society. These issues have led to a daunting outlook for the future of orthodontic education.

“...there is no doubt that dedicated orthodontic educators have been critical to the development of the specialty. The question is whether the faculty will be there in the future to continue this history of strong education” (Larson, 1998, p. 122). This is the essence of a force for change that is necessary in our specialty.

Our responsibilities as educators are to educate our students to be professional and the best orthodontists they can be; teach them how to be experts; prepare them to speak before groups of individuals or to address a judge and jury in the courtroom; and most important — impress upon them the importance to write precisely, accurately and legibly.

Writing is one of the most important methods of communicating our thoughts, especially regarding treatment plans and projected patient outcomes, which can make a big difference years later when we are asked to defend ourselves and we cannot even remember the patient’s name, let alone how we treated them.

Ask any malpractice attorney about how well orthodontists communicate his or her thoughts on a patient chart. Many do not write adequate notes in his or her patient’s treatment chart to explain problems or elaborate treatment issues, and much writing is so poor that whatever is written makes little or no sense.

As educators, this is a poor reflection on us personally. Not only are most notations illegible, using short-cuts, abbreviations and hieroglyphics that are difficult to decipher, but most chart entries are way too short, incomplete and unacceptably inadequate. These are egregious situations and occur too often.

Orthodontic education is in need of fresh blood; this dilemma of full-time faculty member reduction resonates with inadequacies and consequences for today and tomorrow. Ultimately the financial obligation made it difficult, if not impossible, to attract young doctors to consider a career in postgraduate orthodontic education.

As a social justice concern, there may be a huge impact on the survival of the profession, especially the ability to serve the individual and address community needs. The price tag most likely may prohibit low-income students from pursing the degree and also may have a negative impact on serving society as a whole.

As clinicians, researchers or educators must be responsible and accountable for helping our present and future residents benefit from our armamentarium of skills, proficiency and expertise. Whether it be through the Socratic method, a form of inquiry and debate between students or no sense.

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