

## The dentist as a manager: Building effective relationships and networks for personal and professional advancement

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**M**any skilled and highly specialized professionals such as dentists, surgeons, scientists, and musicians invest a great deal of time and resources obtaining the required technical skills and certification, assuming that these will help them reach their professional goals. Unfortunately, only a limited amount of top talent also invests in gaining practical, managerial, and relational skills to accompany their technical expertise. Consequently, many accomplished professionals do not attain their full career potential. Many struggle to build their own businesses and lack basic knowledge with regard to hiring and product pricing. They also have difficulty determining where and if to open a private clinic; how to gain market share; how to reach a patient; and how to build long-term, effective relationships with clients, distributors, and dental staff.

One of the main reasons for this lack of critical knowledge is that many professional schools do not offer basic business courses as part of their curriculum. Is it because they assume their graduates will succeed regardless of such schooling? Is there no need? What percentage of professional school graduates succeed in building their own practices? Who are the most successful dentists? Are they the ones who are the top experts in their field? We often find that it is not always the most capable and skilled professionals who build the most successful practices. What is unique about those who do? What does it take to become a leader in a specialized profession?

Findings from interviews with executives and research conducted in the United States over the last decade<sup>1</sup> suggest that the most successful leaders and professionals are those who know how to build the right relationships and manage and maintain their social networks.

In today's business world, relationships are the new bottom line. The quality and impact of one's work and the profitability of a business depend on relationships: relationships with coworkers, patients, competitors, distributors, investors, and others. Relationships offer opportunities for mutual growth, collaboration, innovation, information sharing, and new business development, but they also pose challenges in these respects. The distinguishing factor between a successful manager and an ineffective leader is the ability to effectively manage relationships.

Nonetheless, most of us do not receive formal training on relational management. When we enter a new organization, no one tells us with whom we should connect and whom to avoid. An organizational chart does not tell us anything about the informal side of the organization, for example, its cliques or internal politics. No one provides a manual that shows whom it is good to befriend, how to build a good relationship with a patient, or how to manage relationships with our colleagues and competitors.



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Many of us spend years attempting to obtain our degrees and certification and progress through our careers without much thought about our professional relationships and networks. Those of us who do pay attention to our relationships and build valuable connections do so intuitively and go with what feels right. Most of us do not look at someone in the organization and conduct a cost-benefit analysis with regard to a potential friendship with this person. Why are relationships not approached strategically? We are very strategic about the type of training we get, the professional school we attend, and the location of practice, but why are we not strategic about what helps us achieve all the above? Would we not be more successful if we actually evaluated a potential relationship with someone, thought about the type of relationship we want to build with the specific person, and for how long we want to maintain that relationship? For example, wouldn't we be better off if we thought about whom would be the best person to study with for exams at school? Who are the best individuals to work with during specialization? Whom not to befriend? These relationships are likely to influence and guide us throughout our careers, and it ought to be important to choose them carefully.

Since most of us deal with relationships every day and are judged by the quality of the ties that we build and maintain, and since our reputation is in the hands of these individuals, why is a course on relationship building not a required course in all professional schools and disciplines? Why is it rarely offered in psychology departments and business schools around the world?

In this short commentary, I argue for the importance of not only providing skilled professionals their specialized training but also preparing such top talent for the challenges they are likely to face as they enter existing workplaces or as they attempt to build their own practices and clinics. I encourage professional schools to incorporate basic practical and managerial skills into their curriculum in areas such as strategy, marketing, leadership, and effective relationships and social networks. Since training or courses on the latter are not readily available, I would hereby like to suggest types of analyses that professionals can conduct to reflect on their relational skills and think of ways to improve them. In the following section, I raise a number of questions with the hope that these will guide readers as they begin to think about building effective relationships and networks for personal and professional advancement.

- **What does my current professional network look like?**

Before thinking about improving one's existing relationships and network, one should first become aware of the status quo. Therefore, the first stage is to evaluate one's current network. As one conducts such analysis, thought should



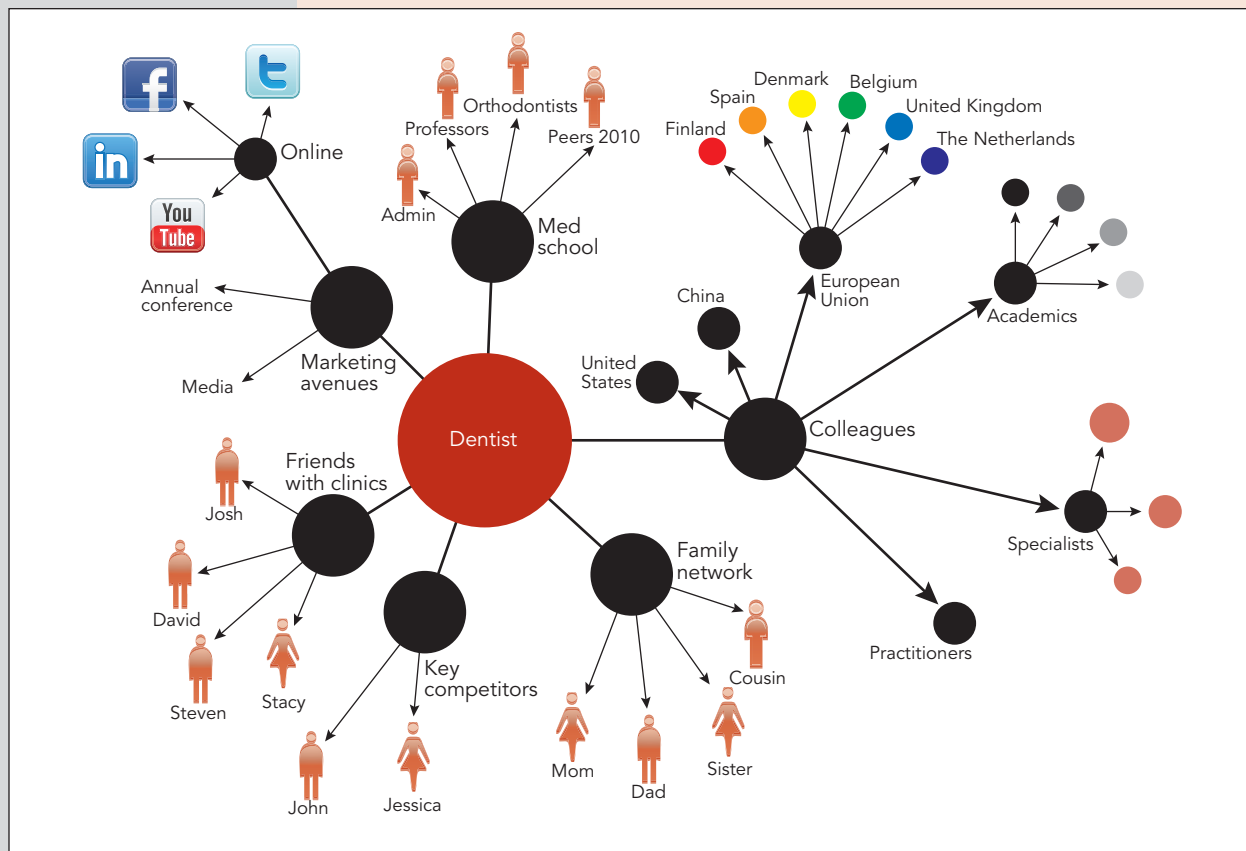


Fig 1 Example of a sociogram of a clinician's ideal network. Original diagram created with Node XL.

be made with regard to direct ties as well as indirect ties—those to whom we are connected to via another person. One could make a list of all the direct and indirect ties and map all the connections in the form of a sociogram<sup>2</sup> or a network map (Fig 1).

- What should my ideal network look like?

Once we become aware of our current network, the next step is to think about how an ideal network should look. The answer to this question is quite complex and will vary greatly from one individual to the next. A helpful guiding question is to think about what one's professional goals are and map the network that will help achieve those goals. For example, if my aim is to open my own clinic, the ideal network should include all the individuals I know who can help me build and maintain an effective and efficient practice. These should include colleagues who have their own practices and can provide advice and refer me to relevant sources as well as individuals who can help market my new business, friends who can help spread the word, individuals who can help me reach patients, suppliers, professional clubs, and relevant academic institutions and academies.

- What type of a relationship should I have with each person in my ideal network?

Once all the relevant individuals and constituencies are on the map, it is important to think of the type of relationship currently in place with each

individual and the type or relationship one *should* have with him or her. One way to decide on the type of relationship is to conduct a needs analysis, which is divided into three stages: (1) an analysis of needs to help achieve professional goals, (2) a determination of who in my professional network can satisfy these needs, and (3) an analysis of what I can provide/offer the other to motivate him or her to build the relevant relationship with me.

To succeed professionally and achieve professional goals, we have career/professional needs and psychosocial needs.<sup>3</sup> By conducting an analysis of these needs and then thinking who can help satisfy these needs, I can begin to think of the type of relationship I should have with each person. For example, an experienced orthodontist who has a very busy schedule and cannot answer all patients' requests may decide to bring in a young orthodontist to the practice to help take some of the load. A relationship with the young colleague will require the older specialist to provide guidance and teach the younger orthodontist various procedures and best practices—a typical mentor-protégé relationship.

Thus, by first identifying the need for assistance and a protégé (stage 1), the experienced orthodontist can review all the individuals in a network and determine who can fulfill the protégé position (stage 2). Nevertheless, although she may want to have a mentor-protégé relationship with a specific person in her network, the other person may not be available or interested in such a relationship. Therefore, an additional analysis should be conducted to try to persuade the other person to develop the required relationship. The experienced orthodontist will need to demonstrate to the potential protégé the possible advantages that she, as a mentor, can offer the protégé and the value of entering into such a relationship (stage 3).

Thus, an analysis of who can satisfy my various needs and what I can provide the other should be conducted to help determine with whom to connect, what type of a relationship to build with him or her, and what professional needs this relationship will satisfy. Once all the needs are satisfied using various relationships with diverse individuals, a chart of the ideal network can be derived and mapped.

The above framework is a useful guide to help map one's ideal network for achieving personal and career goals. However, mapping the network is only the starting point. The next critical step is to think about how to actually build such relationships and maintain them—for example, how to build trust with a new patient, manage conflicts with individuals in my network, and leverage my network to enhance my reputation in my industry?

Many of us should be thinking about the above questions as we reflect on our professional relationships and networks and as we attempt to reach our business objectives. The ability to manage these effectively will determine whether we will succeed and whether we will be able to maintain that success over time.

Professional schools provide the basic knowledge and certification to practice our professions. Managerial and relational skills provide us the tools to take charge of our profession and bring it to where we want it to be.

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