

Tenacious Leadership

Kimberly A. Harms, D.D.S.

Dr. Harms is Past President of the Minnesota Dental Association. Direct correspondence to her at River's Edge Dental Clinic, 213 First Street, Farmington, MN 55024; rivedgdent@aol.com.

When I was first asked to speak, I thought for a long time about which quality of leadership had the most impact on my life. Although I would like to be known for many wonderful qualities, the last two times I was introduced by a member of the Minnesota Dental Association—by people who know me—I was compared to a pit bull. A pit bull! A *dog!* Now this is not every girl's dream comparison and not everyone likes a pit bull, but I would like to think these introductions were just a colorful way to say that I am tenacious. I believe that, along with basic leadership essentials such as honesty and integrity, tenaciously seeking the truth is one of the most important characteristics a leader can have.

We can demonstrate leadership in our lives in several ways. We can demonstrate leadership in the traditional sense when we are elected or hired to lead an organization. We can demonstrate leadership in our professional lives in our day-to-day involvement with coworkers, employees, and employers. We can also demonstrate leadership in our personal lives and the lives of those closest to us, our friends and family. In all of these areas, I believe tenacity for the truth is essential.

When it comes to organizational leadership, the two biggest barriers to uncovering the truth are politics and egos. Anyone who has tried to get a resolution passed by a state or federal legislative body knows how quickly the truth can get distorted as political parties and special interest groups twist and spin an issue to a point where it is almost unrecognizable. A good leader's job is to continually refocus the issues back to the truth.

Several years ago when I was president of the Minnesota Dental Association, an insurance company began ranking dentists and adjusting their compensation based on a secret formula. Dentists were classified into a good group, which was paid more, and a not-so-good group, which was paid less. Dentists were not told by what criteria they were ranked and

had no way to challenge the ranking or even to make sure that the information the insurance company had was correct. In response to this system and its secret formula, we attempted to pass legislation that would require the insurance companies to tell dentists the ranking criteria. This seemed to me to be a no-brainer. I could not understand how anyone could be against a simple requirement to tell the truth about a program. This insurance company, however, had convinced the unions that telling the truth would cost them millions of dollars and significantly increase health care costs across the state. We thought that a simple letter of explanation to the dentists would suffice—maybe 40 to 50 cents a dentist. Our lobbyist told us from the beginning that the Minnesota Dental Association would not be able to get this legislation passed. He was right. After several months of intense lobbying, the resolution was essentially dead. We could not even get a hearing in the Senate.

Fortunately, the University of Minnesota dental students did not accept this situation and sent a petition and letters to every legislator in the state explaining how risky it would be for prospective dentists to practice in a state that allowed secret rankings. Virtually overnight, the bill was resurrected from its death sentence and passed—without a single dissenting vote. Interestingly, the insurance company chose to eliminate the program rather than reveal the criteria used.

Thanks to those dental students, dentists are no longer ranked in this manner. You see, the students did not accept defeat easily. They looked beyond what was expected and found out that the truth literally did set them and every Minnesota dentist free from this oppressive system.

Good leaders are servants of the organization they represent. When leaders let their own egos get in the way, they stop serving the organization and begin serving themselves.

The other egos that get in the way of the truth are the egos of the people surrounding the leader. In

many cases, employees, consultants, and lobbyists were hired many years ago when the needs of the organization were quite different. A leader needs to evaluate these groups to make sure that they are working effectively to meet specific goals, hold them accountable, and then react accordingly. This is one of the most difficult things for a leader to do, but also one of the most important.

When I was chair of the school board in Farmington, I had to confront an administrator who was not working toward the goal of the district. She was one of my closest friends. It ended badly for me personally because I lost my friend, but it was the right move for the district. It was also my job, and if I had taken the easy route and let this issue go, I would have betrayed the trust of the people who elected me. It is absolutely critical for any leader to make sure that employees and outside vendors are evaluated regularly, held accountable for meeting specific goals, and changed if necessary.

When it comes to professional leadership and working with those around us, the same concepts apply. Passive-aggressive and manipulative behavior, which most people learn in middle school, can destroy a workplace. It is essential to clearly delineate acceptable behavior in the office setting, carefully explain the concept of positive conflict resolution, and hold every member of the team accountable for their behavior. Learning how to achieve and maintain a positive working environment is one of the best things you can do for yourself, your coworkers, and your patients.

We learn how to look for the truth in our own way. I learned these lessons at an early age because I was born missing three fingers. Most people assume that I couldn't do a lot of things. Not true! I pitched and played first base in softball (more room in the glove), and I played varsity basketball in high school. In dental school I played coed touch football. My lab partner, Ron Hauptman, was our coach. He announced at the first practice that the quarterback should not throw the ball to me because I couldn't catch and was slow. How dare he! For the rest of the year, every time the ball came my way I thought of his words and made sure that I caught the ball. By the end of the year I had caught more passes than anyone on the team, male or female. The other team even started putting special defenders on me. I was voted most valuable offensive player. I never have and never will let Ron forget his words.

Even before that, when I first got to college, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do (I was a zoology ma-

yor). One day this cute guy named Jim Harms talked to me about the advantages of going to dental school. Now I was acutely aware that most people would assume that you would need all ten fingers to become a dentist, but I wasn't so sure. I immediately went to my adviser to see if he thought it would be possible for me to go to dental school. He stated clearly that he did not believe under any circumstance that I would be able to become a dentist. Now, realistically, most people would probably have given me the same answer and, if he had just stopped right there, I probably would have accepted his answer and looked for another career. Fortunately for me, my adviser made one additional comment. He said that if I were a *man*, I might have a chance.

I saw this statement as a declaration of war. The year was 1974. The women's liberation movement was in full swing. At that moment I was determined to go to dental school. My motivation? Revenge! I was determined to show this adviser that he was wrong and I could indeed become a dentist. So instead of switching career paths, I switched advisers. The University of Maryland had more than 30,000 students, and the secretaries in the advising office were not happy when I had the audacity to tell them that I wanted to change advisers, so when they chose a new one for me, I didn't exactly move up the popularity list. They gave me Dr. Potter.

Dr. Potter was scary. She was a geneticist. She seemed to be at least 100 years old, although she was probably my age now. She had the same hairstyle as Albert Einstein—grey and tousled. She had small black reading glasses that sat low on her nose and she always had a cigarette in her mouth. She could lecture and smoke at the same time. She must have had Velcro in her mouth, because I never could figure out how she could keep that cigarette hanging there. Dr. Potter seemed to delight in the fact that she had the highest dropout rate in the university, and on the first day of class, she raised a crooked arthritic finger and in her deep, raspy voice informed 500 of us in no uncertain terms that in two weeks most of us would drop out. She was right.

I have to admit that when I got Dr. Potter's name, my heart sank. I even considered giving up. But my anger at my first adviser overcame my fear of Dr. Potter, and I reported to her office the next day. To my great relief and surprise, she greeted me at the door with a smile. She asked me to sit down and seemed interested in me. When I asked her if she thought that I would be able to go to dental school, she sat back, paused, and then made a statement that

changed my life. She said, "I don't know. Let's find out." She immediately called the dental school and set up an appointment for me with the head of restorative dentistry, Dr. Buchness. At that meeting he asked me if I could hold a mirror with my right hand. I said yes. He said, "Good. That's all you need to do. You can go to dental school." It took five minutes.

Dr. Potter continued to follow my progress and even wrote a wonderful letter of recommendation for me when it was time to apply to dental school. Dr. Potter changed my life. She did it by taking enough interest in me to look for the real truth instead of making an assumption that most people would consider obvious. She admitted that she didn't know something, and she actively participated in my search for the truth and helped me achieve success.

All of us, like Dr. Potter, have opportunities to significantly change our lives, the lives of people around us, and the organization we serve. We need to be careful not to miss these opportunities, which may at first appear to be obstacles, by tenaciously seeking the truth. Like a pit bull, we need to tenaciously hold on to these truths through political upheavals, ego issues, and the doubts of those around us. Only then can we truly hold our heads high and know that we did our best for our own lives and for the people or organizations we serve. As leaders, we are in a unique position to make a difference. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all be tenacious enough to change just one life the way Dr. Potter changed mine?