

Vignettes by James Hilgers, D.D.S., M.S.

The Business of Orthodontics:

Meetings

The Problem: I strode into my financial manager's office and, finding it empty, nodded inquisitively at my receptionist. "Where is Linda?" I asked. "She's in a meeting," she said. "What do you mean she's in a meeting?" I cried. "She's got a meeting with me." "I know," she said, "But this meeting just came up. Can your meeting wait?" "No," I said. "I have another meeting in an hour." We looked at each other like two animals not comprehending their environment. "Have her see me when her meeting is over," I said at last, and left her office.

While preparing for my next meeting, I tried to remember a time when the business of Orthodontics was orthodontics. But that time was before my time. As long as I can remember, the business of Orthodontics has been meetings. Morning huddles. Afternoon huddles. More huddles than the L.A. Rams. A lot of people think that's a good thing. Oh, sure, meetings are a humongous waste of time. But that's the point! They should be viewed, nay, celebrated, as a collective metaphor of an evolved culture of leisure. It's kind of a half-empty, half-full thing. I mean, people look at Washington and cry, "Gridlock, gridlock!" as if that's negative. And, yes, it would be negative if it were only gridlock. But, again, it's a metaphor for something much grander. *We've come to the point where we can endlessly discuss and never decide and, moreover, never do.* Is that not glorious? Is that not a human ideal? In praise of idleness!

Meetings are the Andre Agassi of the workaday world, for they epitomize the premise that image is everything. They let you look like you are doing something without actually having to do anything. You go in, chat it up a bit, toss a well-timed witticism into the proceedings, and, two hours later, you're out of there. Lunch!

Oh, you might have to jot a memo, maybe even dash off a report, make a new list of things "to do." But that ain't exactly baling hay (whatever that is). Besides, "to do" lists are good. They are the fertilizer that ensures a bumper crop of new meetings. *And without all those meetings, where would we be? That's right: doing something.* Shudder at the unevaluated thought.

The Solution: No, I don't have utter disdain for meetings... just a touch of disdain, I guess. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that I hate to waste time. Years ago, I was convinced that daily and weekly meetings were the answer to good communication. And, if pushed, I

guess frequent full staff meetings are better than no communication at all. The problem is, endless talk usually doesn't solve problems. Solving problems solves problems. *Talking about work isn't work. Work is work. Get it?*

My staff and I dutifully got together at the appointed, anointed times and threw darts at all the problems in the practice. We played all the tricks: I would assign a meeting leader (not myself, of course, heavens no), I would throw dollars at everybody who had a decent idea, we had an agenda...we did all the things the orthodontic spin doctors told us we should do. Problem is, talk is cheap. Ultimately, doing is the only answer. And the doing part is handled better when you go to the source. One on one communication. That doesn't mean that you don't have meetings. It's just that, in general, you do them in a little different way.

Impact is always the greatest when something is dealt with at the precise moment the problem shows its ugly face. Waiting a day or a week or a month only dilutes it. There is a loss of urgency. It's easy to talk about...and not do much about. *The problem loses its intensity.*

The Key: *Learn to communicate in the moment.* The idea is not to have regular full staff meetings, but lots of mini-meetings all day long. And only with those people involved. They can be used for teaching ("Everybody, come over here, I want to show you how to adjust this archwire"), positive feedback ("Everybody, come over here, look at the great result"), discipline ("Denise, you need to pay a little more attention to..."), problem solving ("Cherie, would you solve this problem for us...it would really help me if you would"). We get together lots. One on one. Two on one. Clinical Staff together. Clerical Staff together. Whatever it takes. Anyone in the office can call a mini-meeting. They are short and sweet. They are more focused, in a One-minute manager style.

This doesn't mean that we don't have full staff meetings. But there better be a really good reason for them. Not something that can be solved in mini-meetings. There should be a balance. Get more in pace with tackling problems at the moment. Don't wait. As the Nike ad says, "Do it now." Remember, every full staff meeting costs you \$200-300. You had better get your money's worth.