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By Michelle C. Dziurgot, DDS
Editor-in-Chief

Autocratic vs. Democratic Leadership Styles

As a continuation of my editorials on styles of leadership, I will present my thoughts on autocratic vs. democratic styles. An authoritarian philosophy consists of a leader giving orders that are not to be questioned and are to be blindly followed through, without any input from the team. All decisions come from the “boss,” and these bosses do not encourage the sharing of ideas between teammates.

If an idea is presented, authoritarian leaders will ignore it and proceed down the road they believe is the only way to move forward. The team members have their hands tied behind their backs. They are hushed into participation, since even if a much better idea comes to mind, the leader will “poo-poo” it. Unfortunately, these leaders have high social prominence and limit their inner circle to a group they know will always agree with their thoughts. These leaders are great during times of war or when a fledgling company is in its infancy. They can make all the necessary decisions quickly, since most of their subordinates are not yet up to speed.

But why stay with such a leader? They are quick to temper and often callous towards their team. Examples of such leaders are cult leader, Jim Jones, businesswoman Martha Stewart, and French military leader Napoleon Bonaparte. What comes to mind when you read these names? These authoritarian leaders were able to make quick and demanding decisions, but which led to the demise of their team. Autocratic leaders do not provide a safe and positive work environment. They have no trust in their team.

On the other side of the leadership style wheel is the democratic leader. This type of leader still gives the orders, but wants input from the team. The team members can express their opinions and concerns with the leader’s orders, and feel safe in doing so. Group decision-making is key. The leader will only finalize an order once the teammates have voiced their ideas. Democratic leaders are highly respected, since their employees know they are valued. This positive environment leads to

employees being more productive and efficient. It is a collective arrangement.

Democratic leaders are inclusive. There is less turnover in their teams. Examples of such leaders are Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy. Now, what comes to mind when reading these famous men’s names? A lot! They brought people, and lots of people, together to complete their goals. They knew how to direct, yet relied on input from their people to encourage change. How amazing were these men, that even today our world is a much better place than before they walked the earth?

In our dental offices, authoritarian leadership may work well during the first few years of practice, especially when opening an office from scratch. But can that type of leadership style sustain the practice? Would the team continue to come to work if such a dictatorial type of environment continued past the first few years of opening?

A democratic leader is a comfort from start-up to retirement. This dental leader is a pleasure to work with. They can sustain the practice from inception, growth, and passing on the torch to the next owner-dentist. I am proud to say that from the get-go of my current office I brought my hygienist, lead dental assistant, and patient care coordinator to every meeting that dealt with their space in the office. From closet and cabinet design, to what dental equipment and materials worked best in their hands, each had a say in how the office would run. Yes, I made the final decision on what was purchased, but they were behind me the entire way, having my back.

Hats off to all the democratic leaders out there! ●

Thoughts? Opinions? Why not share your views with other MDA Journal readers? Send comments to Editor Dziurgot at mdziurgot@michigandental.org.