

Gratitude and the Academy

We live in an amazing time! Advancements in materials and technology have occurred so rapidly that we often struggle to determine which ones are important and which ones are not. It is easy to become lost in it all. As we strive to advance amid all of the changes, sometimes things can go awry. Recently, I was in the steam room at the gym and was struck by the conversation of two other men who were vocalizing a frustration that I have felt in some situations in my professional life and that, I believe, reflects a frustration that I have seen in some other academy members.

These gentlemen were discussing how discouraging it is when someone who has benefited from the investment of many others eventually “makes the big time” and then seems to forget the contributions of those who helped enable that achievement. The conversation concerned a local man who has made it to the national scene. Even though his success can be directly attributed to the support and encouragement of others in his community, he doesn’t appear to be investing in the next generation back home. As the conversation drew to a close, we all agreed that it is often easy to discern whether a person is working from a basic attitude of gratitude or one of greed. At least in his interactions with his home community, this boxer exhibited a clear attitude of greed.

It has been said that a distinguishing characteristic of a professional is having a core motivation of service to others. This is in contrast to a pure tradesman who is motivated by maximizing profit. And in one sense, this difference is wrapped up in “gratitude or greed.” In those moments when I feel frustrated by things that I observe happening in our world of dentistry, I can often connect the situations to a lack of an “attitude of gratitude” on someone’s part. As dentists, we must recognize that each demonstration of greed diminishes our right to be called a professional.

Hanging on my office wall is a hand painted sign that one of my daughters made for me. It says

simply, “Gratitude or Greed.” I look at it every time I walk into my office. Which will I demonstrate? I wish that I could say that I have never allowed greed to influence my actions and decisions. But, to the extent that I can live with gratitude, our profession will benefit. The goal of every interaction becomes one of service with gratitude; service to God, to family, to students, to patients, to the professional community, and to the community as a whole.

Maintaining this attitude of service can go a long way toward helping sort through the advances of materials and technology. Do I need the added expense of the newest and latest? Will the quality of care be enhanced for my target patient population? Will it improve my ability to serve with gratitude? Or, will it drive me toward an attitude of greed because of increased overhead with no benefit, pressuring my cash flow? Obviously, the right answer will not be the same for every individual in any given situation. Organized efforts to provide relatively unbiased information, something seen with professional academies, enhance a practitioner’s ability to provide service with gratitude.

Membership in a professional academy can help members sort through some of the questions that surround the rapid changes in our world. Just as it has for many others, I know that membership in the Academy of Operative Dentistry (AOD) has helped me do that throughout the years. Unfortunately, membership in academies is dropping. Along with that decrease in membership, the ability of the academy to impact the profession through dissemination of information is being challenged.

My membership in AOD can be directly attributed to a practicing general dentist who recognized the importance of the information exchange that occurs through the professional academy. He also recognized that, during the early years of private practice, it was very difficult for me to maintain membership in those organizations that would enhance my dental knowledge and, as a result, our profession. He went

out of his way to provide the financial resources for me to be an active member of AOD during those early years. This man acted from a position of gratitude, to the benefit of a fellow practitioner and for the good of our profession.

Are you coming along side of a young practitioner in your community? Are you willing to do whatever it takes to encourage that practitioner to be an active member of your academy? When membership stays

strong, the information exchange is strengthened. Don't become like that boxer who forgot the people who helped him achieve his level of success. We all should be living with an attitude of gratitude for those in our communities—for the benefit of all.

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