



Change Engines

A good time to think about change is at the beginning of a new year. Happy New Year!

In today’s world, the way organizations, corporations, political groups, schools, and—yes, even practices—want to show progress and continuous improvement is by extolling their “change engines.” Along with this they will want to make sure their own particular “leadership abilities” are well defined and bringing about change. [Leadership will be a topic for a future *ProsStars Newsletter*.] Each group will be sure to emphasize that they invented “change,” and they will want to ensure that you pay attention to their manner of it.

After all, we pay good money to travel to dental meetings, one-day clinics, and short courses just to hear another guru’s version of change, be it technical or managerial, even if they have nothing new to say or teach. And if that guru is a snappy, well-dressed, and well-known clinician with the right visual aids or an office manager who is not that bad looking herself, we will be even more eager to hear them. The most important of all is the new dean, the new department head, or the new commanding officer in the military! They will assure you that what has gone on before was just a “preparation” for their new style of change, a change that will immortalize them in that particular organization.

Every business vehicle including the Wall Street Journal, Smart Money, Fortune, and Forbes magazines—and the latest in business books (*The Change Management Handbook*, Lance Berper, *Embrace Change*, Kent Bent, *20 Books on Change* listed in the Achiever Newsletter)—is attempting to enlighten you how you should change for the better. Did you know you need all of this information on change?

The loads of information on change can become bothersome and repetitive! But let us cut to the chase. All of life from day one and from every day thereon is a series of changes. We will help ourselves if we categorize our everyday changes and break them down to be better understood. As we see it, there are several effects of change to be considered and they are:

- Personal changes: effects from growth, education, moves, family, marriage, divorce, friends, and influences from injury and disease.
- Changes from invention: new developments such as TV, computers, cell phones, jet travel, teaching aids, credit cards, automobiles, drugs and drug therapies, Internet communications, package and mail transport, air conditioning and refrigeration, and a host of minor new developments occurring so fast that obsolescence becomes almost commonplace.

- Systems changes: your medical insurance sells out to a different carrier with different programs and benefits; your route to work is being reworked and you are detoured; your stops at the bank are now at ATMs and online; your dean eliminates your department and combines others; your airline reservations are now online and not personally carried out with an agent; you drive through the toll booth with a EZ-pass; you run a gamut of menus when wanting telephone information.

Personal Changes

If you stop to think about it, most personal changes are a result of fate. You did not select your parents or where you born. Your friends happened to be those placed next to you at school or living close by in your neighborhood. You and your mate just happened to be in the same locale at the same time and you both experienced an attraction for each other that came without great plan. You will not have the option to choose the bug or the accident that will end your life. In summary, personal changes happen, but you cannot affect them much.

New Developments

New inventions will arrive faster than you can process them. You will learn to use some of them and find advantages in many of them. These are what add up to progress in our lives. They often make our work and our personal lives easier and less strenuous. Would you rather be driving a horse and buggy or a Mercedes S-500? Would you rather stand in line for a pay phone or dial up your call on your cellular phone anywhere, anytime? New developments are what offer excitement and interest in our lives.

Systems Changes

These are the changes to which we should pay attention. You may not be able to see them coming. You may not be able to control them. But from time to time you will be involved in them and they will grossly frustrate you. They will affect your life so much that it will be changed forever—usually adversely.

Are not we lucky that in our independent practices there is no frequent leadership change—maybe even never during the life of the practice. Ah—one of the great benefits of dentistry and the dental specialties—we are our own bosses, our own leaders, our own CEOs, and our own Board Chairmen. In addition, there have not been too many technical changes to quickly overwhelm us. Fluoridation, the high-speed hand piece, and implant dentistry are our most important technical changes in the past fifty years. Luckily, minor dental materials improvements, gleaned mainly from industry and the dental manufacturers have made our lives easier at the chair and our techniques more acceptable by our patients. A great systems change in our practices?

Usually not, because we are in control and we establish a system we can live with. Personnel changes are the most frequent happenings in our practices and we usually fit them into our systems without difficulty and without changing the system.

Adverse Systems Changes in Dentistry and Its Specialties

Contrary to a private practitioner's good fortune, there are the changes that come about from the elimination of a dental school department. Consolidation with a new department head, new secretaries, new telephone numbers, remodeled or new workspaces and clinics and a new set of competitors for academic advancement are the usual changes. For certain, those are adverse changes that need much individual adjustment. What is worse is when the university president or its board of trustee decides to shut down, eliminate, delete, vaporize the university's school or college of dentistry. If you like teaching and depend on it for a partial livelihood, you are affected terribly by such change. Your life changes. Your livelihood changes and you can do little about it. But do you know who likes it? The physicians and the medical school like it because what dentistry had, the medics now have. Winner takes all! Just ask the Georgetown University School of Dentistry's faculty if this is not true.

Or try comprehending what is happening in the military today. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has instructed the Armed Services to "transform" themselves—*changing the nature of forces as to their tactics and doctrines with changes in the processes of force management*. The intent of his transformation is *to instigate new strategies using all of the services together to meet the threats of tomorrow's war*. Now what in the world would this have to do with military dental care? Here is what—

The military administrative hierarchies decided that money and manpower could be saved by merging dental activities and commands into those of medical. We in dentistry clearly understand that our profession is separate and apart from that of medicine—and that we have separate academic and research institutions and practices usually apart from those of medicine. Dentistry is not—repeat not—a specialty of medicine. Did Secretary Rumsfeld or the military line leaders ever think of this or did his directions ever imply that "force management strategies" should filter all of the way down to dental care? Very probably not! It is doubtful that he gave any instructions related to dentistry. But the Armed Forces' medical people took it and ran with it, seeing the opportunity to do away with dentistry, as we know it. Now we have a very adverse systems change causing careers to be ruined, wastes of training, lifetime goals altered beyond repair, and no recourse available for the military dentists intimately involved.

In a very short while there will be no Army or Navy Dental Corps—at least corps standing on their own—managing themselves and being solely accountable for their missions. No, now the service's Medical Corps will now get the credit, the money, and the promotions.

The Lesson to Be Learned

The lesson in the above two examples is this—do not be complacent in dentistry, especially knowing many of our deans intend to make “little physicians” out of us. Do not be complacent in dentistry’s perfectionism, doing everything correctly, with less, with great promise from our financial successes. With the costs of medical care rising astronomically, the legislators, the deans, and the physicians working within the health plans, in our universities, in the military and in government all salivate when they look at dentistry’s successes. They quickly conclude that dentistry has to be part of the problem and they can make it “thee” problem with little effort. They see us as a nit on an elephants back and, what little good we do, should quickly be picked off. Is this a paranoid viewpoint? Who knows, but just watch your backside, dentistry.

Change happens!

The passing of a Quiet Giant

Dr. Alex Koper died quietly and comfortably at home on December 4, 2004.

Alex was born on January 15, 1917. He attended UCLA, later receiving his Bachelor of Science degree from USC. He graduated from the USC School of Dentistry in 1942. He entered the Army and was stationed in the Pacific on the island of Guam. Following his World War II service, he returned to Los Angeles and practiced in Inglewood for many years before relocating to West Los Angeles.

He was one of the first candidates to challenge the newly formed American Board of Prosthodontics. He was a Charter Fellow of the American College of Prosthodontists. He served on its first Board of Directors and was its president in 1972. In addition to the ACP, his professional activities included: founder and president of the Federation of Prosthodontic Organizations, founder and member of the Academy of Esthetic Dentistry, president of the Pacific Coast Society for Prosthodontics, member of the Academy of Prosthodontics, member of the Academy of Fixed Prosthodontics, and president and editorial consultant of the Los Angeles Dental Society.

Alex directed the USC Odontic Seminar for forty years. He established the Advanced Prosthodontic Education program at USC, one of the first on the West Coast. Along with past USC Dean, Howard Landesman, he expanded USC’s Department of Continuing Dental Education to include an international program. In this capacity, he lectured and created participation courses all over the world.

In his personal, life Alex was an accomplished pianist, a wine connoisseur, and avid bicyclist. His sense of humor was unexcelled. He was known for his honesty and integrity as a husband, father, prosthodontist, teacher and friend. He was generous with his time, and his clear insight,

wisdom, and knowledge created a great passion for success in prosthetic dentistry. These positive attributes leave a legacy that will continue for generations in dentistry and the specialty of prosthodontics.

Alex Koper will be sorely missed.

[Information provided by Roy Yanase with thanks.]

Editor—Publisher Statement

The *ProsStars Newsletter* began publication in April 1995. Thirty-five issues were published in the paper format (which ended one year ago). Five issues of the online newsletter have been published since. The five are archived at this Web site for your convenience and review. The interest of the reader totally drives any publication. If there are reader subscriptions they indicate interest and in part pay for publication and mailing. A free online vehicle does not provide the same feedback or any expense money, and although accounting for numbers of “hits” is possible, such tracking comes at a greatly added expense. Getting no feedback tells us that there is plenty to read elsewhere, plenty of TV to see, enough scientific information out there to fill available study hours, and most of all, little interest in “issues,” issues that are not important enough to get all stirred up about anyway. Dentistry and its specialties cruise along with little interruption and few crises. So “if it ain’t broke, why fix it?”

OK, another “issue” follows, but we will have to see some reader interest, or it is not worth having a debate with ourselves just to produce a pretty Web site. A newsletter the likes of which is not seen elsewhere, published five times a year, received at no cost, and read in a matter of minutes is really quite a deal! Does anyone but the editor and publisher think so?

NDW