

Standards in Leadership in Oral Health Care

Introduction

The oral health care profession faces new and emerging challenges and opportunities: ever-increasing patient expectations, transformational technological advances including artificial and augmented intelligence, workforce shortages, and evolving healthcare delivery models. Oral health care demands exceptional leadership at every level -from individual practitioners to leaders of international organizations. Yet, unlike most other aspects of dental practice, leadership in oral health care lacks standards, creating a critical gap that impacts the quality of patient care, outcomes, professional satisfaction, and public trust.

By establishing clear benchmarks for leadership behavior and emphasizing continuous reflection, evaluation, and improvement, these standards offer practical guidance for practitioners at every career stage while strengthening public trust in the profession.

Background

As used in this document, the term 'standards' refers to expectations that define what is required of individual practitioners and those in leadership positions in oral health care. Individual and collective compliance with these standards is critical to maintaining professional standing, status, and, most importantly, trust among individuals, the profession, and its institutions. Without standards, there are no behavioral and attitudinal norms. Standards serve as a benchmark for personal behaviour, development and advancement, defining minimum levels of competency and achievement. Knowledge and understanding of standards inform judgements about how oral health care leaders should act and provide insights into the actions necessary to sustain and advance the profession for the benefit of patients, communities, and populations.

In dentistry, standards have been developed and embraced many aspects of clinical practice, education, and research. In clinical practice, standards ensure quality of care and patient safety. In education, standards focus on features of the learning and teaching environment and minimum educational attainment. In oral and dental research, standards are vital to ethical conduct, the reliability and validity of findings and reporting.

To date, there has been an absence of standards to guide leadership in oral health care, a void which is considered to have caused a disservice to the profession and the patients it serves. As stated by Carr et al. (2025): "Leadership matters because it is the only capability that can systematically bring out the best in people so they can achieve more together than they can alone."

Research

Research in health care leadership demonstrates clear links between effective leadership and improved patient outcomes, staff satisfaction, and organizational performance. Studies show that healthcare organizations with strong leadership report 12% better patient satisfaction scores and 18% higher staff engagement (West et al., 2015; Shantou et al., 2017). What little research has been reported on leadership in oral health care indicates that leadership effectiveness in dental practice correlates with treatment plan acceptance rates, enhanced quality of care metrics, team retention, and practice profitability (Nash, 2010; Hanks et al., 2020).

Looking forward

In oral health care, leadership is, and will remain essential at all levels, from chairside and practice leadership to local, regional, national and international leadership. Core standards, which may be considered a professional responsibility, apply at all levels. Acquiring and applying knowledge, understanding, capabilities and experience in ascending levels of leadership should be regarded as part of career development. Leadership is not innate; it is an acquired capability. This capability is developed through experience, together with structured learning and teaching, mentoring and proactive appraisal and feedback. Quality leadership has many benefits, including a rich source of professional fulfilment.

The future of oral healthcare, and the critical part it plays in general health care and well-being, will, in large part, be determined by the quality of leadership in the profession going forward. The present initiative to set standards in leadership in oral health care is the key to that future.

References

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Standards

The following standards for leadership in oral healthcare are informed by the Ethics Handbook for Dentistry of the American College of Dentists, and the internationally recognized principles for service in society: **selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, incorruptibility, openness, and honesty**, all of which underpin trust and, in turn, faith in the professions.

All dentists, as health care professionals, must exercise leadership to be effective in their service to patients and society, and to uphold and enhance the standing and status of the profession.

Leadership by dentists in the provision of oral health care and in service to society is both a responsibility and a privilege.

These standards aim to:

1. Enhance patient experience and outcomes through improved team effectiveness
2. Establish clear expectations for leadership behavior across all career stages
3. Provide a framework for leadership development and assessment
4. Assist leaders and the teams and organisations they lead to realise their potential
5. Strengthen the profession's ability to adapt to future challenges and ever-increasing expectations

Core standards

The following core standards in leadership are integral to the professional behavior expected of a dentist:

1. **Put the interests of others you serve first**—prioritize patient welfare above personal or organizational gain.
2. **Act with purpose, setting aside bias or prejudice**, to ensure decisions and actions are based on fairness, clinical evidence, and professional judgment.
3. **Demonstrate humility, empathy, respect, integrity, openness and accountability**—model the virtues you expect of other professionals.
4. **Foster trust and confidence**—build credibility through consistent, transparent actions and effective communications.
5. **Make sound, defensible decisions** based on best clinical practices, best-available evidence, and the values of the patient.
6. **Acknowledge and address mistakes**—admit to errors promptly, apologize where appropriate, and take corrective action.
7. **Seek assistance early**—request help or refer to avoid adverse outcomes.
8. **Accept and respond to justifiable criticism**—objectively manage and apply lessons learned from valid criticisms
9. **Commit to lifelong learning**—pursue continuing professional development relevant to your role and emergent needs and technologies, e.g., augmented intelligence, adapting to change.
10. **Maintain personal well-being and resilience**—engage in reflection to sustain high-quality performance and ethical decision-making.

Team leadership

As the leader of the dental team, a dentist must, in addition to practicing the core standards in leadership, adhere to the following:

1. **Ensure the patient's well-being**—every decision is made with the patient's best interests and values as the primary motivation.
2. **Lead with fairness and transparency**—treat every team member with respect, integrity, and openness.
3. **Foster a culture of trust, inclusivity, and collaboration**—actively create an environment where all voices are heard and valued.
4. **Lead by example**—display model professionalism, ethical behavior, and clinical excellence in daily practice.
5. **Ensure team effectiveness**—align people, attitudes, behavior, processes, and resources to deliver safe, high-quality care; be alert to and effectively manage conflicts.
6. **Assume responsibility for decision making and delegation**—own the outcomes of the team's choices and actions.
7. **Support team well-being and resilience**—recognize and address burnout, stress, and professional challenges.
8. **Promote continuous professional development**—embed a reflective ethos of learning and continuous quality improvement.
9. **Encourage feedback on leadership**—invite constructive input to strengthen the team and help develop leadership insights, capabilities, and performance.
10. **Acknowledge good performance**—express appreciation for professional contributions.

Local and regional leadership

1. **Understand local and regional leadership requirements**—be familiar with legal, regulatory, and cultural expectations.
2. **Build strong stakeholder relationships**—establish trust and effective lines of communication with community partners, professional networks, and media.
3. **Foster collaborative partnerships**—develop and maintain strategic professional, interprofessional, and other partnerships to enhance the impact and outcomes of local/regional leadership.
4. **Promote ethical and professional behavior**—encourage fairness, respect, integrity, inclusivity, and openness.
5. **Lead strategically**—develop and implement well-reasoned plans that drive sustained improvement.
6. **Be accountable and consultative**—share decisions transparently and actively seek diverse opinions.
7. **Learn from peer leaders**—exchange insights and best practices with local and regional leaders to strengthen collective leadership capacity.
8. **Take responsibility for leadership decisions**—accept responsibility for your actions, communications, and outcomes.
9. **Manage conflicts**—promptly and effectively arbitrate disputes.
10. **Mentor emerging leaders**—identify, encourage, and prepare others for leadership roles, including advocacy in public health.

National and international leadership

1. **Understand national and global leadership responsibilities**—be informed about policy, laws, governance, and cultural differences across jurisdictions.
2. **Establish effective lines of communication with diverse stakeholders**—develop credibility with professional organizations, policymakers, and national/international media.
3. **Develop and maintain strategic alliances**—forge partnerships that advance oral health, professional standards, and health care innovation nationally and across the world.
4. **Champion ethical leadership**—advance high standards of professional behavior, fairness, respect, integrity, openness, and inclusivity nationally and internationally.
5. **Demonstrate visionary leadership**—through well-reasoned, forward-thinking strategies to address emerging challenges and opportunities.
6. **Maintain accountability and openness**—be consultative, accountable and encourage feedback on the leadership provided to further develop leadership skills and performance.
7. **Continuously learn from national and global peers**—share and adopt best practices from diverse health care systems.
8. **Accept responsibility at the highest level**—take responsibility for leadership decisions, actions, delegation, communications, and their outcomes.
9. **Exercise statesmanship**—use negotiating skills to achieve consensus and, in the process, resolve differences and conflicts.
10. **Develop the next generation of leaders**—encourage, train, and mentor future national and international leaders to ensure a strong leadership pipeline.

The following matrix summarizes these leadership competencies by level.

Competency Area	Team Level	Local/Regional Level	National and/or International Level
Communication and Conflict Resolution	Patient interactions and team meetings	Community engagement, local media	Policy makers, global forums
Strategic planning	Practice improvement	Regional development	Profession-wide transformation
Partnership development	Intra- and interprofessional teams	Community collaborations	National/ international coordination
Mentorship	Team members	Local and regional colleagues	Future leaders in the organized profession

Assessment and Continuous Improvement

Effective leadership requires regular evaluation and a commitment to growth. Leaders should assess their effectiveness through multiple sources including patient feedback from surveys, ratings, and direct input; team perspectives gathered through staff surveys, 360-degree appraisals, and team meeting consensus; organizational outcomes measured against performance goals and benchmarks; and honest self-reflection examining their behaviors, decisions, and leadership style. No single assessment method fits all situations or leadership levels. The most valuable approach combines quantitative metrics with qualitative insights, conducted as objectively and fairly as possible, with external facilitation enhancing objectivity when appropriate.

Critical to success, leaders must not only seek feedback but act on it. Meaningful improvement requires regular evaluation cycles rather than one-time assessments, honest self-reflection on both strengths and growth areas, concrete action plans based on findings, follow-through and accountability for change, and reassessment to measure progress. Assessment is not an endpoint but rather part of a continuous cycle of reflection, learning, adjustment, and improvement. Leaders who embrace this cycle create cultures where excellence becomes the norm and both individuals and organizations reach their full potential. Without this commitment to ongoing evaluation and growth, even the most talented leaders plateau, and their teams and organizations fail to achieve their full capacity for impact and innovation.

Conclusion

The development of standards for leadership in oral healthcare represents a critical advancement for the profession at a pivotal moment in healthcare delivery. These standards—spanning core professional behaviors through team, regional, and national leadership competencies—provide a framework that addresses the current void in leadership expectations while positioning the profession to navigate emerging challenges in technology, workforce dynamics, and evolving patient needs.

By establishing clear benchmarks for leadership behavior and emphasizing continuous reflection, evaluation, and improvement, these standards offer practical guidance for practitioners at every career stage while strengthening public trust in the profession. Implementation of these standards, supported by ongoing assessment and refinement, will enable dental professionals to systematically develop leadership capabilities that enhance patient outcomes, elevate team performance, and ensure the profession's continued relevance and impact in advancing oral and systemic health. The oral healthcare profession now has the opportunity to lead other healthcare disciplines by demonstrating how explicit leadership standards can transform professional practice, education, and service to society.