



How to get out of your own way as a practice owner

By Julie Parker

I've been thinking quite a lot lately about the invisible forces that keep dental practice owners from stepping into their full potential – I'm not just meaning as business leaders, but as human beings wanting to make a meaningful difference.

I was listening to a podcast recently about the things that stop people from being true "bad asses" in life and I couldn't help but see how much of it applies directly to dental practice owners. Running a practice isn't just about teeth. It's about people. It's about leadership, influence and creating an environment where both patients and your team feel valued, safe and inspired.

Yet so many owners stay stuck or frustrated. Not because they lack skill or passion, but because of subtle obstacles that quietly sabotage their progress. So, let's talk about these barriers through the lens of dental practice ownership and see how we might move beyond them.

Your brain wants comfort, not growth

The human brain is wired for one main job – to keep us safe, conserve energy and seek pleasure. Fantastic if you're running from tigers, but not so helpful when you're running a business.

Growth requires discomfort. It demands that you challenge how you've always done things.

For dental practice owners, that might mean having uncomfortable conversations with team members, putting new systems in place that feel foreign at first or learning skills like financial literacy or leadership communication.

But there's another layer to this. Sometimes we feel discomfort not just because we fear failure, but because we fear success. It sounds odd, but stepping into bigger success often challenges how we see ourselves. It stretches our confidence and pushes us beyond the limits of what we've achieved in the past.

Discomfort doesn't mean danger. It just means new. The more often you lean into what feels uncomfortable, the stronger and more capable you become.

Fragility will keep you small

Something I've noticed over the years is how much more fragile people seem to have become. As a society, we've grown less tolerant of discomfort, criticism and anything that challenges how we see ourselves. And while this might feel safer in the short term, it absolutely hampers your ability to be successful as a practice owner.

Running a dental practice means facing moments when things don't go your way. Someone might say something hurtful or challenging. A patient might complain. A team member might push back on your ideas. You might face disapproval or obstacles you didn't anticipate.

When you're fragile, these moments become reasons to retreat. You pull back, avoid action or keep yourself small to avoid feeling uncomfortable. But if you want to run a thriving practice, you have to build resilience – or what that podcast I listened to recently called becoming "anti-fragile".

Anti-fragility means you don't just survive challenges – you grow stronger because of them. Each criticism, setback or uncomfortable moment becomes fuel for growth rather than a signal to give up.

Fragility kills progress. Resilience – and ultimately anti-fragility – builds it. And it's a critical trait for anyone who wants to create a practice that not only runs smoothly but also delivers extraordinary care and patient experiences.

Drama

Let's talk about drama – not the type you see on reality TV, but the drama we sometimes create in our own lives.

As practice owners, we can fall into the habit of interpreting ordinary events in ways that fuel emotional reactions and create unnecessary turmoil. A patient cancels and suddenly it means "people don't value what we do". A team member asks a question and we decide they're "undermining us". Instead of allowing situations to pass through our awareness neutrally – or to prompt growth – we add layers of meaning that drain our mental energy and distract us from what really matters.

Living through the lens of drama keeps you stuck. It keeps your mind busy with stories and emotional highs and lows instead of focused on constructive action. And when you choose drama, you also tend to attract other drama-driven people into your sphere – which only compounds the problem. This doesn't mean ignoring challenges or pretending everything is fine when it isn't. It means choosing not to add unnecessary "mustard" to situations. Deal with problems directly, without inflating them into stories that derail your focus and your goals.

If you want to grow as a leader – and as a person – commit to observing situations as they are, not as the dramatic stories your mind might spin. Because drama might feel engaging in the moment, but it's a huge barrier to achieving real success and fulfilment.

Self-love isn't self-coddling

Self-care is essential. But there's a fine line between looking after yourself and avoiding the very challenges that help you grow.

I see practice owners decide they need "balance" and then use it as a reason to avoid difficult conversations, accountability or strategic changes. But the reality is that leading a practice well sometimes requires stepping into discomfort so you can ultimately experience greater freedom and fulfilment.

The minute you find yourself retreating into self-coddling, pause and ask: how can I empower myself instead? What solutions could I seek that would ease my mind and help me grow?

Taking a break is self-love. Avoiding growth is self-coddling. It's important to know the difference!

Negative emotions are teachers, not enemies

Many owners shy away from feelings like fear, frustration or embarrassment. But those emotions are signals. They show you where your opportunities for growth lie.

Feel defensive in a team meeting? That might be telling you that you need to work on your communication skills or boundaries. *Feel anxious about finances?* Maybe it's time to face the numbers head-on and learn how to manage them.

Negative feelings don't mean you're failing. They mean you're stretching.

You're both good and bad, right and wrong

One of the most liberating truths I've learned as a business owner and coach is this: you can be an incredible leader and still make mistakes. You can be kind and still have moments of frustration. You can be wise and still have blind spots.

Stop waiting to be perfect before you lead boldly. Your team and patients don't need perfection. They need authenticity, vision and consistency.

Putting patients first, always

At the heart of all this is a simple idea: patients must come first. Not as a slogan, but as a lived truth.

Everything you do – how you manage your team, how you structure your systems, how you handle money – should serve the goal of delivering the best possible care and experience for your patients.

Be curious about working with your team

There's something I believe is vital for practice owners and it's curiosity – specifically, curiosity about how to work better with your team.

I've seen the damaging impact of the mindset that says, "I pay this person, so they must do everything I say". It's a trap. Yes, you're the leader. Yes, you pay the wages. But leadership isn't about issuing orders and expecting blind compliance.

A practice runs at its best when you create an environment where your team wants to participate. Where they're not just doing tasks because they're paid, but because they care, feel valued and see how they're contributing to something meaningful.

Ask yourself regularly, "How can I collaborate better with my team? How can I make them feel respected and heard, while still maintaining accountability and standards?"

When you approach leadership with genuine curiosity – wanting to understand your people, their strengths and what motivates them – you build a team that's more engaged, loyal and committed to the same patient-first vision you're striving for.

Curiosity in leadership isn't a soft skill. It's a powerful tool for unlocking your practice's potential and creating a culture where everyone, including you, can thrive.

The power of self-reflection

One of the strongest elements in my own personal growth has been regular self-reflection. It's easy as a practice owner to stay busy – running from patient care to staff issues to business decisions – without ever pausing to look inward.

But if you're serious about becoming the best version of yourself, you need to make time to reflect. Not just when things go wrong, but as a regular habit.

Ask yourself questions like:

- Where am I being reactive instead of proactive?

- What patterns do I keep repeating and are they serving me?
- What situations consistently trigger discomfort or fear in me?
- Where am I avoiding growth because it feels too hard or confronting?

Self-reflection isn't about beating yourself up. It's about getting curious. It's about noticing your own thoughts, habits and emotional responses so you can make conscious choices rather than running on autopilot.

Some of my biggest shifts have come from simple moments of realisation when I've stopped to ask, "Why am I really resisting this?" or "Is this fear talking, or is there genuinely something here I need to address?"

Growth doesn't just happen because you read the right books or attend the right seminars. It happens when you regularly turn inward, look honestly at yourself and then choose to do something differently.

So if you take one thing away from all of this, let it be this: the obstacles that hold you back as a dental practice owner are rarely just external. More often, they're within – in your mindset, your patterns and the stories you tell yourself. But that's also the good news, because it means you have the power to change them.

Be willing to lean into discomfort, to become anti-fragile, to step away from drama and to reflect deeply and honestly on how you're showing up each day. Stay curious about yourself and your team and keep your vision anchored in putting patients first.

This journey isn't about perfection. It's about progress. And every step you take towards growth, no matter how small, creates ripples of positive impact for your practice, your team, your patients and – most importantly – for you.

About the author

Julie Parker is a Dental Practice Management Consultant and Team Educator. At the age of 33, Julie became the first non-dentist to own a dental practice in Australia. Julie is Co-Founder of Julie Parker Practice Success and Co-Founder of Dental Business Mastery. Visit julieparkerpracticesuccess.com.au and dentalbusinessmastery.com.au to find how Julie can help your dental practice be more successful through consulting programs, online courses, podcasts and more.