

Ep #104: Defining Your Uniqueness in an Era of Sameness



Full Episode Transcript

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Dr. David Phelps and Evan Harris

[Dentist Freedom Blueprint](http://www.DentistFreedomBlueprint.com) with Dr. David Phelps and Evan Harris

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Andre Shirdan: When it comes to working with the practices I work with, the first thing I ask them is, "Tell me about your smile. Tell me about your clinical philosophy. Where do you stand clinically?" If we can define that, then we have a reason that our patients come to us, stay with us, and we have a crew who can relate that philosophy of care.

You are listening to the *Dentist Freedom Blueprint* podcast, with David Phelps and Evan Harris. Navigating you through the uncharted waters of a turbulent economy with straight-forward advice to, transform your practice into a self-sufficient cash machine, compound your net worth assets, and multiply, multiply, multiply your passive cash flow streams.

Dr. Phelps: Good day, everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps from the Freedom Founders Mastermind community and the Dentist Freedom Blueprint podcast back with you today with what's going to be a fun, entertaining, and really, I think, innovative interview today with a gentleman that I had the distinct privilege to meet in person earlier this last fall.

I had an opportunity to go to Philadelphia. One of the doctors in the Freedom Founders Mastermind, Dr. Eric Shelly, and one of his co-doctors there in Philadelphia, run the Philadelphia Academy of General Dentistry and often do workshops there and bring in good people, good speakers. Doctors and staff come. Dr. Shelly and his host had a dinner the night before it all began and I got to meet one of the other speakers and that's the gentleman we'll have on today, which is Mr. Andre Shirdan. Andre, how are you doing today, sir?

Andre Shirdan: Great, David. It's good to talk to you.

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Dr. Phelps: Andre, I remember when we had dinner that evening you were quiet. One of the kind of people that when you speak, you always want to listen to. Not that I couldn't hear you, but just you weren't a person who was just verbose just to be verbose. I appreciate that. Didn't really get to know you well until the next day when you did your presentation in the workshop. I thought, "Wow, this guy not only knows his stuff and it comes from a servant heart because he believes what he talks about," but you're very engaging. You are a very excellent speaker.

I want people that are listening to this podcast to know a lot about you. I'm going to read your bio in a minute, but I just want people to know that you are really good in your connection with people, both one-to-one and one-to-many, which is what I got to see both of. I was just immediately energized and magnetically thought, "You're the kind of guy I want to be around more." I know that's the way it is for you. You attract great people and it's just been a privilege to get to know you in the short time we've been friends.

Andre Shirdan: Well, I appreciate that. It's my goal to listen twice as much as I speak. It's always been my way.

Dr. Phelps: You practice it well. Well, let me give our folks a little bit more background because you have a very interesting background that I think, again, gives you great presence in what you do in dentistry today.

Andre is from Philadelphia. He studied graphic and interior design. After college, he embarked into the world of very high-end retail sales, customer service, and management, receiving training on the customer service methodologies of Ritz-Carlton and Disney. In 1989, his

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dentist, who also happened to be his brother-in-law, asked him to use his skills that he formed outside of dentistry, to help transform his dental practice.

In that same year, Andre founded Systems Practice Management, Incorporated, a dental practice management training and consulting firm that created The CREW Process - we're going to talk about that today - The CREW Process, Building Blocks Scheduling, Countdown Confirmation, SELL training, the Square Exam, and the PracticePar Analysis. Andre was contributing creator of the companies Dentalife, Dynamic Dental Systems, HMS, and worked with Patterson Dental Company for 11 years.

As I just mentioned, Andre is an inspirational motivational speaker. He's an author, certified software and CAD/CAM trainer. He's a co-creator of the nonsurgical periodontal protocol Stat-Ck and imaging protocol Array. For more than 25 years now, Andre has worked with thousands of practices helping to create systems for treatment planning, staff training, goal attainment, internal and external marketing, and computer systems integration.

He's spoken internationally to hundreds of audiences. Through his workshops and seminars, he has enlightened and entertained audiences. I will definitely verify that. He's been interviewed and published in magazines, podcasts, has interacted with thousands of dental professionals.

Andre, that's a very, very overwhelming amount of accomplishments you've made, but I know it's because it's what you love to do. Take us back when you were in graphic and interior design. What were you doing there

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and talk a little bit about your foray then into dentistry with your brother-in-law's practice.

Andre Shirdan: Well, I got into art because that's my passion. Every time I look at an office's logo, I want to redesign it. My passion came from what I did in my artwork. Like every other person that has an art degree, I got into another career. I got into retail after working with some designers. Got into retail, very high-end retail couture clothing. Really got deep into customer service, really learning how to take care of the customer at a high-end level.

What happened through that was my brother-in-law, who ran a really small boutique practice, but general practice that was all about taking care of his customers, his patients. He was my doctor for years. The first time I went to visit him, I had nitrous. He actually canceled his next patient to drive me home. This was just my dentist. He wasn't my brother-in-law at the time. This was the kind of guy who just really took care of his customers, took care of his patients.

He said, "Hey, can you help me? I'm struggling. My business is failing." A lot of it had to do with the fact that he overcompensated for customer service and didn't look at the business of dentistry. His business was failing and failing poorly. He asked if I could help him. I had no idea what I was doing.

I came to his office, looked at his bookshelf, and said, "Can I take home some of these books?" Started reading up and going to courses with him. The first course I took with him was on nonsurgical perio. I had never even seen an extraction done and here I am standing over a cadaver

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watching bone being placed. I just really dug in and learned everything I could, took every single course.

The great thing about being a guy in an administrative role in a dental practice, every course that we went to assumed that I was a dentist. They said, "Hey, Dr. Shirdan, would you like to sit in on this procedure?" I would just say, "No, well, I'm not licensed to practice in Pennsylvania, so I'll just watch." I got a chance to really see what happened, and learned the business, and just get fully immersed in it.

I learned my ADA codes. I learned everything I could about insurance companies. I actually went out to work for an insurance company for a little while to do some learning there. Just really looked at things from a different perspective because one of the things, even 30 years later, I never really wanted to be in the dental field. What I wanted to do is I wanted to look at dentistry from a bird's-eye view and say, "This is what I see and this is what I can contribute from outside, although I'm deep inside this business. I wanted to see it from outside so that I could constantly refresh the way that things were done.

He gave me the opportunity. My brother-in-law gave me the opportunity to play with things and experiment with things as we did it. We would try something and then we would try it again. Then we would do a marketing campaign and then we'd do something else. He was very open to that in the same way that he did dentistry. We brought in new techniques, and we did new procedures on a regular basis, and we did new marketing and customer service skills. It became my incubator for the company that I started. I took that all across the country.

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Dr. Phelps: You know, I think there's definitely a huge benefit from the standpoint that you came not from within dentistry, from within the ranks, you came from outside and you had a great vantage point that I think many of us within our own industry we miss out. It's kind of a forest from the trees. We get so inculcated within what we do in our own practices that we can't see outside.

To have someone from the outside come in and say, "Look, guys and gals. What I'm saying today is that we hear a lot of moaning and complaining about the fact that practice margins are being compressed because of managed care insurance and corporate clinic competitions coming in and eroding our market base." Well, you come in and say, "Hey, gang, get used to it. This is real life. This is business. You guys have been in a protected industry for so many years. This is how it really works. Guess what. There's an answer. There are solutions." I think that's what we love about what you bring is that it's not just the same old, same old.

Tell us a little bit more about some of the things that you saw really start to change in your brother-in-law's practice, because I think this is applicable. I know many great clinicians as you do. Really love what they do, but again, the business side, the customer service side, the ability to differentiate their practice, which they think - and I used to think, too, the same thing - is that, "Well, if I would have took the next course and became really, really great at cosmetic dentistry or really great in implants, somehow that would just permeate out into the community and everybody would just come to my practice." Somehow that doesn't work out. Give us a little bit more in terms of how you helped your brother-in-law,

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or any other great dentists that you work with, to make some initial transitional steps and changes that most are not really seeing.

Andre Shirdan: Well, the one thing, again with my brother-in-law, here's a guy who loved ... I mean I can't tell you how much he loved dentistry. He was the kind of person who would take every single course. Every single supply rep that came in knew that they had a mark. He would buy anything. Here's a guy who had no money who everyday talked to me about buying a CEREC machine. No money.

Here's a guy who loved it so much that I saw every product that would come in and I would say, "You know what? Do you realize that patients could care less? They really could care less about what you're actually doing when it comes to dentistry. They want the music that you offer. They want the nitrous that you offer. They want the fact that you could drive them home." It was something that we marketed that. It was something that we did that went above and beyond the procedures. When that drill started, he became a mechanic and that was really all it was about. It had nothing to do with how we marketed the practice.

How we marketed the practice was people loved the music in the office. He played jazz, which wasn't that Yanni, smooth jazz stuff. He played really good jazz, plus other kind of music. Patients who would come in would specifically ask, "Hey, what was that song you were playing?" We started actually making up CDs specifically for our patients. Now, this was in the years of the Walkman. We would actually make up a CD specifically for that patient and actually play it for them. Give them

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headphones and let them sit and listen to music while they were in the chair.

We started marketing this as, "Hey, we could come up with a menu of things that the patient would like." Now, this wasn't the typical spa practice where we're playing mood music and fountains. This was meat-and-potatoes, very middle-class practice where we did a lot of production out of a very small practice.

We started catering to people and we started getting referrals from people for not the dentistry. He was a good dentist and he didn't hurt or anything like that, but it was about, "Hey, I hear that you guys are really laid back and you do things a certain way." We got referrals from those things and not from the dentistry. He loved the dentistry, and he was good at it, and the work looked good and felt good, but it had nothing to do with dentistry. It had to do with the way that we worked our philosophy of care. It had to do with how patients saw us outside of dentistry.

Nobody came into the office and said, "Ew, boy, I don't want to be here." They would come in and say, "It's nice coming here." Not to talk about the dentistry, but just coming to the office. We use that as our marketing technique. That's what I started trying to do when I went around to other offices is trying to break them from that idea that dentistry is the thing that we sell here. What we sell in the office is this philosophy of care.

I'll give you an example from my retail days. I had a customer who would come in who would buy size nine women's shoes, which is a large size for a woman's shoe, a larger on the scale. She was a really small woman, had probably a size-six foot, but she used to love the idea of

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walking around with these larger shoes, almost like your daughter would walk around in Mom's shoes.

At the beginning I thought, "Well, this is crazy. This woman is buying these \$600 shoes and they don't fit her." Then I realized they did fit her. They fit her philosophy. They fit the way that she loved to feel when she wore these shoes. Then I realized I wasn't selling a product, a shoe. I was selling a feeling or a philosophy of care.

That's when I started going, "You know what? This is where dentistry has to change. We have to stop thinking about the procedures and start thinking about the outcomes that we have." That's when I started looking at dentistry a whole lot differently. That's what I try to apply to everybody I work with.

Dr. Phelps: Andre, I know that dentists feel like they have to carry the world on their shoulders. They wear so many different hats in trying to be this small business, entrepreneurial owner, and keep up with all of the changes, the constant technological updates in dentistry in this case. How do you build the culture around the dentist, the philosophy, the vision that you were just talking about? Tell us a little bit about what CREW is about. I alluded to that in the beginning.

Andre Shirdan: The idea behind CREW is years ago - and this goes back to probably I guess when I was originally in retail - I got sent to a lot of team-building courses. We had to build the team. We had to have a team. Together, everyone achieves more.

The first thing I thought about when I went into management, I started trying to build teams, was, "You

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know what? Why are we building these teams so that everybody became friends and at the end of the day, we all went out and had margaritas?" That never moved the ball forward, if we use a sports analogy. We're not a team. What we are is a group of people who like each other. What we need is a group of people who seek a common goal.

I'm from Philadelphia. Philadelphia's a big rowing town. I started looking at the idea behind a crew and thinking about the idea of when we work as a crew, we all row at the same pace. We all have a common goal in mind. That means to win the race, to get the boat going as quickly as possible, in a straight line as possible, everybody has to do their job while they're in that boat for that 20 minutes or 90-minute ride, whatever it is. When we're done, then we can have teamwork and we can have fun together and we can go have margaritas, but while we're on that boat we have a common goal, we have a common way that we have to do things. We have to have that mentality. That's when I stopped with the idea of team and started with the idea of CREW.

Now, CREW is also an acronym for a process and we'll talk about that. I had to get people to stop thinking about team-building. I hear this everyday in dentistry: "Oh my team does this and my team does that." This is the first thing I saw when somebody says, "We have a great team." I said, "Okay, if you have a great team and you guys go out and buy lottery tickets, and somebody buys one on their own and they win, are they going to share it with everybody else in the office?"

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I said, "You don't have a team. You have a group of individuals who have individual needs, individual goals, but they're not focused on the goal of the practice. They're focused on the harmony of the team. Let's get them off of that. Let's get a new focus, which is the goal of the practice, the philosophy of the practice, the process of the practice, and the profitability of the practice. Let's build that. If you don't have that, if you don't have that commonality, how can you hire people? How can you build processes? How can you build a profitability motive if you don't have these things?"

That's when I started with CREW. CREW has become this process of if we're going to do this, here's how we do it. Each month we create a challenge. That's the C in CREW. We create this challenge. Then each month we reflect on what we did the last month. That's the R in CREW. Then each month we build a new plan or an energy to move this plan forward. That's the E in CREW. Then each month we have to measure it or we come up with a win. That's the W in CREW. Each month we challenge, we reflect, we energize, and then we win/measure it. Each month we do this, then we can move the boat forward in a very consistent manner.

It also is a process so that if we're evaluating employees, then we can say, "Sally, our challenge this month was to collect X. How did we do last month? Okay. What was our plan for this month? Then we just measured it and we did not meet our goal. It has nothing to do with you personally, but it has to do with the goal. This is not about team." Again, harmony: "This is about our commonality and our goal."

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It actually puts into place the process that everybody always looks for, is, "How do I measure outcomes and how do I challenge my staff to go forward, but also, how do I compensate them?" You use CREW. You have to measure what you want as an outcome. It's an easy process. My goal in life is everything should be four parts. Keep it simple, stupid. You know? It has to be really, really simplistic in the way that I see it. Four parts makes it simple for me because I'm a perio guy and I think in quadrants.

Dr. Phelps: There you go. Andre, when you come into an office and you do an assessment, the doctor has reached out to you and is having typical issues that, again, we as doctors and small business owners often have with our crew - the people that we have straddled ourselves with, whether that's a small group or a larger group - is that we're not adept at hiring. We're not adept at building these processes with the team.

When you come in, I'm just curious, how often do you find, and what period of time do you find, that maybe there are some people that are not the right people, the right seats, as Jim Collins would talk about? How often do you move people? How often do sometimes you need to free somebody up to leave the practice, which is very hard for us as dentists to do, as you well know?

Andre Shirdan: Yeah. It's funny because everybody expects that that's what I'm going to do when I come into a practice is move people around, move people on the bus. One of the things that I find is that people tend to make themselves available for other positions when consultants show up.

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What I like to do is I think of myself not as a consultant, but as a coach. I come in and I look at your players on your team. Let's use that analogy. I'll say, "You know what? Here's some strong players. If we were an NBA team or an NFL team, we would go out and we would seek the best at their position. How they gel is a different story, but let's find the best at what we can find."

Then we measure that. We say, "Okay, you are the person that answers the phone. Let's see how you do this. I'm going to show you the philosophy of the practice. I'm going to show you processes that we expect. I'm going to show you our plan to get better at what we do. Then, we're going to measure it each month. At the end of the month, we're going to see how well you're answering the phone. If you can't do this, then maybe we can find someplace else in the practice that might work within your skillset or maybe you should be successful someplace else. It has nothing to do with the fact that I don't like you or you're not a nice person, but maybe you're not the right fit for this job." There's no issue with that when it's not a personal issue.

I come into a practice with the idea that I think everybody who works in the practice has potential to be a great person, but maybe they're not a great person in that position. I've been told that I'm a very cold person when it comes to things like that, but I still have I think every friend that I've ever made in dentistry. I don't have a fear that I'm a bad person when it comes to this.

I'm not a person that fires people, but I am a person that will say, "Hey, look, maybe you're a good person in our sterilization area instead of our front desk." There's

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certain people who just aren't the right fit at the desk. Maybe they're not the right fit chair-side. Maybe they're not the right fit as your hygienist.

It's funny because most of the time, the individual members of the crew will tell me as soon as I come in, "Hey, you know what? You're probably here because of Marge." That's kind of the thing that I typically hear. "She's probably not going to be around much longer if you're going to get some of these things in place." The crew tends to self-adjust. That's okay. I'm happy that people can find success in other industries.

It's funny because there's been so many opportunities that I've walked into an office and things tend to settle the way that they should. People move on. People move up. People step up. I'm okay with that and I'm okay with being the catalyst for that change because I come in as a third party. It's funny. Doctors always say, "Well, I've been waiting to fire her, but you just gave me the strength to do it."

Dr. Phelps: Exactly.

Andre Shirdan: I'm okay with that. I'm okay with that.

Dr. Phelps: Yeah. Yeah. I think that comes around to doctors and leadership. Again, it's something that we got no training in school. We got all the clinical training, all of the biochemistry and pharmacology that we needed, but we got nothing in leadership or management. In fact, the majority of dentists, I think, would just love it if they could walk in the door, go right to the patient's mouth, focus, put the loops on, and go to work, and never think about anything else. That's not real life.

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My question around that, Andre, is that you come in, you do a great job building the CREW, the people, the process, the profit, the philosophy of the practice, and at some point, unless you're kept on year after year, at some point you're going to pull yourself out. You come and you've done your job. You've got a practice that's running well. Now, how does the doctor, as a leader, sustain what you've brought in? Is that something that you help the doctor with? How successful can doctors who sometimes abstain from leadership become leaders?

Andre Shirdan: Well, I have a philosophy within my own business and when I work with offices. Do you know what a skein is? People know it, but they don't even know what that means. A skein is the formation that geese take, that V. It's called a skein. It's one of those weird things that I found out.

Dr. Phelps: Okay. Got it.

Andre Shirdan: I like that idea where the dentist is the leader for the time it takes to be the leader. Then, when he puts his loops on, when he gets chair-side, he lets go of that responsibility and another goose takes over as leader. You've got to pass responsibility on, but that can only happen after those four things are in place: philosophy, process, profitability, and people. Once those four things are in place, he, the doctor - he/she, sorry about the way I put it - but that leader needs to be able to let go of the leadership and have somebody else take over the day-to-day. I will cringe every time I see a staff member asking a doctor for vacation time while the doctor's got the gloves on.

Dr. Phelps: Right.

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Andre Shirdan: Leadership has to pass. Again, once I work with an office, that process is in place so that there are leaders for each area of the office. There's somebody who's leading the admin team. There's somebody who's leading the clinical team. Those things happen so that leadership passes from person to person based on who is at the front of the skein at that time.

I'm okay with that, but you can't do that when you have this wishy-washy philosophy. You can't do that when you have this wishy-washy group of people who are your staff. You can't have it when you don't have profitability. We have to get those things in place first and then leadership takes care of itself until something happens catastrophic with staffing or something in the business. I try to leave when those things are in place.

The great thing about the clients I work with is no matter if somebody worked with me in 1989 or they just started with me in 2017, they always have my ear. If there's an issue, they call me and I'm back in the office, on the phone, whatever needs to happen. They never lose that ability to have a coach help them out.

Dr. Phelps: Very good. One last thing I want to bring about that you talked about when I got to hear you speak in Philadelphia. You were utilizing the fast-food industry and making some comparison distinctions there in terms of the ability for fast food to differentiate. I think it was McDonald's, Burger King, Chick-fil-A. Just roll into that because I think that's a good thing for us to understand.

Andre Shirdan: That's where I come back to the business philosophy. The analogy that I use is if we're driving down the road and we get to a corner, there's a McDonald's on one corner, the

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Burger King on the other corner, the difference in philosophies is minimal. Flame-broiled as opposed to on a grill. Who cares? We're going to look at the one who has the shortest line.

If the other choice at the corner was a Chick-fil-A, there's a philosophy of care there. There's definitely something that says where they stand, how they stand, where they're going with their business philosophy. If it's a Sunday, we really know where they stand because guess what - they're closed.

Dr. Phelps: That's right.

Andre Shirdan: When it comes to working with the practices I work with, the first thing I ask them is, "Tell me about your smile. Tell me about your clinical philosophy. Are you a Pankey guy? Where do you stand clinically?" If we can define that, then we have a reason that our patients come to us, stay with us, and we have a crew who can relate that philosophy of care. If we don't, we're just Burger King and McDonald's. We have nowhere that we stand.

Are we going to be Disney and we're going to be the happiest place on Earth, or are we going to be Universal where it's a lot of fun to ride the rides, but who cares? People look at the cost of Universal. They don't look at the cost of Disney. Disney is an experience. Universal's a place to go where you can have fun. It's a difference.

That's what I do when I look at the practices. Are you McDonald's, you Burger King, or are you Chick-fil-A? Do you stand out above where we are? Because those who don't stand out ... I just saw today in my email. Sears and Kmart are closing. Why? It's because nobody cares

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anymore. There's no more philosophy. Why do you go to Sears? Eh. Nobody cares anymore. I'd rather go to the Target. We've got to build those philosophies of care in our practices to get us to the next level and to get us so that we're here in the next 20 years.

Dr. Phelps: Exactly. Andre, you're very open and accessible because, again, you love what you do. Let's let our listeners know how they could engage with you through website, email, phone numbers that you want to give out, because I know we'll have some people who would like to reach out and learn more about what you do and how might be able to help them.

Andre Shirdan: Sure. Well, website is always available: www.thecrewprocess.com. Email, easy way to get me. It's: andresyst@comcast.net. Phone number. Easy. You can get me through the phone number anytime: 484-437-5562. That's my cell. It goes directly to me. I'm kind of a fanatic about my phone, so if it rings, you will be talking to me. Otherwise, if I'm with a client, I'll send you a text right back and I'll catch up with you as soon as I get done.

Love talking to people. My philosophy is you don't pay for my service. You only pay for me traveling to get to your office. I love working with offices all the time. I don't mind giving advice and talking to folks. Anytime anybody has a question, you're welcome to call.

Dr. Phelps: Well, Andre, thank you so much. This has been a lot of fun and I'm glad we could bring you out to share with a lot of people that join our podcast. If anybody has a chance to hear Andre, go take your staff. Go hear Andre. He's excellent. He's exceptional, as you can probably tell just from our podcast today. Once again, Andre Shirdan,

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thank you so much for being a part of the Dentist Freedom Blueprint podcast today.

Andre Shirdan: Hey, thanks so much, David.

Dr. Phelps: Take care and we'll talk to you soon.

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