

Ep #164: Dr. John Meis - From Private Practice to CEO



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Dr. David Phelps

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You are listening to the *Dentist Freedom Blueprint* podcast, with David Phelps. 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.

David Phelps: Good day, every one. This is Dr. David Phelps on the Freedom Founders Mastermind community, and the Dentist Freedom Blueprint Podcast today, with a person that I've really been looking forward to interviewing for quite some time. In fact, he's a gentleman that I have been following with great interest for a number of years in our great profession of dentistry. Without further ado, let me just introduce who he is. Dr. John Meis, glad to have you with us today.

John Meis: It's glad to be with you, and I've done the same. We followed each other for some time. We've had some near misses, but we finally got this to happen. Glad to be here.

David Phelps: Excellent. We also got to spend a little time recently at another mastermind group, and it's not surprising that people that I find who are making things happen or doing things in any space, dentistry or otherwise, seem to always be interacting at a high level with a group of people. I knew our paths would cross, and sure enough,

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they did. It was great to spend that time with you, learn more about you, and see the great things you've done. I think today, my goal is to pull some of those nuggets out from you to give to our audience, which is going to be primarily probably a lot of our dental colleagues, but we've got a lot of people that jump on from other professions, because business and the health professions, it's all pretty much the same today. Things are moving fast. Are they not?

John Meis: Boy, I'll say. Hard to keep up.

David Phelps: Hard to keep up. Yeah, it is. That's right. It can be fun if you look at it that way and position yourself for the opportunities. Isn't that right?

John Meis: Yeah. For sure.

David Phelps: Yeah. Let me give you a little background before we dive in here, John. Dr. John Meis is the CEO and co-founder of Smart Choice Dentistry. He's also the CEO and co-founder of the Team Training Institute. We'll talk a little bit about those platforms in a minute. John is an international speaker, best selling author. I think you've got three book out now. Am I correct?

John Meis: I do.

David Phelps: Yeah, three books out. You're a consultant. You advise businesses and practices in the dental industry on topics of strategy, culture, leadership, and execution. Dr. Meis' unique ability is to make the complex simple, boy I need that in my life just about every day John, the hidden visible, and the difficult easy. The Team Training Institute, which you co-founded with Wendy, Wendy Briggs, right? You two are-

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John Meis: That's right.

David Phelps: Yeah, together. You help dental practices become more productive, profitable, and with peace of mind in a fun atmosphere, with advanced and in office coaching practices, often achieve a significant improvement very, very quickly. His proven executive coaching process helps business strengthen their culture, clarify their strategy, and update their business plan. Let me just dive right into it. Then we'll get some of your background. John, you're a very humble person, and what's on your bio is very short, very sweet, to the point, but it doesn't really give context of who I believe you are. I want to dig a little bit there today.

Obviously, you were a practicing dentist, a clinician, but not just average. What I know about you is you went very, very deep into clinical training. You became very, very adept at many procedures, high level procedures. At the same time, you also were, along the same path, you were developing your business acumen. In fact, you even have business school training, besides your dental training, professional training, correct?

John Meis: Yeah, I have. I did my executive education mostly at the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago.

David Phelps: Did you do that after dental school or before? When did you fit that in?

John Meis: After.

David Phelps: After. Okay.

John Meis: Yeah, after.

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David Phelps: How many years after? You graduated what year from dental school?

John Meis: 1986.

David Phelps: Then how soon did you go to Booth to do some business education?

John Meis: It was quite a while later. The story is I had no business acumen whatsoever. I did not know how, really, to run a practice or manage a team, like most dentists. My first bit of business education was that was, I met up with a group of guys. I had a consultant who put together a weekend with his biggest clients. I wasn't big at the time, but I was one of their biggest clients. I met all these people who understood the business of dentistry so much more than I did.

I put together a group of those people. We got together on the phone every month. We tackled a different topic. That's really where a lot of my business education came from, was with those people. That helped me to understand how to run a practice. One of the people that learned with was a person who had multiple practices. He helped me start to learn the business side of an enterprise. Then when I joined that group's, on their executive team, now I had all kinds of people teaching me the business of an enterprise, not just of a practice, two totally different animals, as you probably know.

David Phelps: For our listeners, how does somebody, and you also have a family. You raised kids and you're doing all this. To me, it seems like there's so much just to learn to be a top level clinician today. There's so many advanced, so many things happening there, and yet at the same time, as you said, the ability to understand how to operate, run,

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manage, lead a business, is a whole nother set of skills that none of us ever got. How did you manage all of this? Was it difficult or do you have that in your DNA, to be able to juggle all these balls and do them well? Obviously, not maybe at first, but you've managed to really rise to a very top level in both aspects. I think that's hard today. I think you're a little bit of an outlier. Again, I know you're humble, but I'm just saying, it seems to me that's a difficult thing to do.

John Meis: When I look at my own personal unique ability, it is that I'm a learner. I always spent time learning and reading. I read at least a book a week. I'm in multiple coaching programs to help me hone my craft. I just have sought out wise people who could teach me something. I would learn it as quickly as I could, and execute it, implement it as quickly as I could. I met a lot of people over the years who were great learners, but didn't necessarily implement very well. I think the combination of those two things, certainly had great teams all along the road. That helps a tremendous amount. It just snowballs.

Your knowledge, the longer you're a learner, the more it's almost an exponential kind of thing. You can bypass stuff that's either been proven wrong or that you already know. You're just looking for those little nuggets. David, I know you're exactly the same way. I know you know what I'm talking about. If you go to an event, say you're at an event for two days and you get one thing, that one thing powerfully executed is worth the two days that you were there. I'm grateful that I've had so many good mentors and teachers that have helped me understand how I can improve my effectiveness.

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David Phelps: Yeah, I totally get that. I'm like you. I'm a very avid learner. I love to learn. Like you, I read books. I'm in multiple masterminds coaching programs, mentors. Those are definitely the pieces of the puzzle that let me get in a place where I can live my life the way I want to live it. I think that's what everybody wants to do. You've got to find, what's your unique ability, as Dan Sullivan would say. What's your genius zone to figure that out? Then to go to implement, and I think so much of the time that our training in school, not just professional school, not just dental school or graduate school, but throughout our years of school, is that you don't want to make a mistake. You don't want to answer the question wrong.

It's almost hold back and don't implement, don't step forward, don't put yourself out there, because someone's going to come and tell you, "You're stupid, you're an idiot, why'd you do that?" You obviously, that wasn't something that you didn't have a fear factor there. You realized, obviously quickly, early on, that the only way to make progress was to step forward. Even though you might not step forward exactly in the exact way that you needed to, you would get the feedback quickly, right? To figure out, "Okay, not quite the step, but you know what? I can iterate, I can move, I can shift." Was that always a part of your upbringing? Did you grow up in a household where you were plodded to try things out and not be worried about failure?

John Meis: Actually, not. Actually, not. In fact, really the opposite of that. I think it helped me though, because I already had this internal battle with myself, that I'm not smart enough, that's I'm not good enough, that I don't work hard enough. I had that narrative within me. For me to just out and try

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stuff, I saw it as a chance to finally succeed rather than a chance to fail.

David Phelps: I'm sure that even that initial group of people that you put together, mentors, other practice owners, the phone, call them the mini masterminds, if you will, I'm sure that helped you, because you seem like you were the one that prompted that. You decided to pull this group of people together.

John Meis: Oh yeah.

David Phelps: Someone has to do that. Someone has to step up and lead and facilitate. It doesn't happen by magic, does it? Somebody has to do it.

John Meis: Yeah.

David Phelps: You did it. You said, "Hey, this is something I think we can do." For how many years did this particular initial group, these phone, were these weekly meetings generally?

John Meis: They were monthly.

David Phelps: Okay, so monthly. How many on the call, generally? What was the group size?

John Meis: There were about 20 people in the group, and you could depend on probably 12 to be on any individual call.

David Phelps: All right. Of course, this was not a paid thing. You weren't getting paid to do this, right?

John Meis: Initially, there wasn't any fee. When we started to add events, then there started to be fees for it. I was doing all the work. I put everybody together. I figured out who the smartest guys in the room were to begin with, and I flew

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to their offices. I flew to Texas, I flew to Florida, flew to Kentucky. I met with them and I said, "Hey, I'm putting this group together. Would you be interested?" It's hard to say no face-to-face, so they signed up. Then once those were signed up, then many people wanted to get in. There were people chasing me to get in, that I just, I had what I needed, so I was turning people away.

David Phelps: Once you got this group started, the affinity for each person was in the group, they all brought something to the table.

John Meis: Yes.

David Phelps: You personally, you curated this group, so you knew what you were doing. Do you think they had any idea what the mutual benefits would be when you first started? They were doing you a favor. You spent the time, you came out, you met with them, you flew to their offices. "Sure John, yeah. I'll do that for you." They were impressed, obviously by you taking a step forward. Do you think there was a little bit of that feeling like, "Yeah, I'll just do this for you. Probably we'll do a couple calls and we'll be good." Do you think there was any thought like that, or do you think they had the foresight to see, "Hey, this guy's got something going and I think it's going to be something that will be good for all."

John Meis: I think they learned a lot as well. The unique thing, there wasn't just one practice model. There was different practice models, and there were just people that were successful at what they were doing. I think they were learning along the way as well. I think it was valuable for everybody. They were learning different things than I was learning, because they were so far ahead of me along the

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path. I caught up to almost all of them, just by learning and implementing what I learned.

David Phelps: It seems like that's a key to what you've done, is, as you said, you're not just someone who just takes in more information, but you actually would go and implement it. We talked last week a little bit about the fact that within a period of just a few years, you had outpaced in terms of growth, many of these great people that you spent time with.

John Meis: Oh, for sure.

David Phelps: Probably mostly due to your implementation. Then you mentioned also about having great teams. I'm with you there. We can't succeed, or grow, or transform our businesses and our lives, unless we have people around us that we build that culture. You already expressed that. How were you able to have these great teams? Again, was that something that came naturally to you, or did you have to try and fail a little bit at first?

John Meis: Oh, yeah.

David Phelps: Tell us a little a bit, because again, I want people to ... These are key components, and I don't want people to think, "Well heck, I've tried that and it didn't work, so there's something wrong with me."

John Meis: Right. No, I definitely had to learn how to lead a team. There's no doubt about that. When I started, I was a complete knucklehead. I really knew nothing about it when I started, but I was able to learn and read. I had some great mentors that helped me understand how to move human behavior, how to build a culture, how to pick people and repel people that don't fit the culture, or how

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to make those difficult decisions when somebody's okay but not good, and certainly not great, how to make those tough decisions that you're never going to have a great team if you hold onto people that are just okay.

David Phelps: Since you've studied with some of the great practitioners, business owners, as you said, enterprise builders, you've done it yourself, and you're helping. We'll talk a little bit more about what you're doing today in a moment. If you had to give advice to a younger practitioner today who was where you were, where I was 30, some 40 years ago, getting out of school and starting practice, where would you tell them to focus? They've got their degree. They're out, hopefully not in a startup practice. They're maybe with a good mentor, but where should they focus?

First, I know there's got to be a little bit of a balance here, but again, the focus is typically go take some good CE, get training in this area, this area, so you can add more services, so you can become more of a decathlon better dentist. There's no question that that's a huge benefit, but where would you place that in terms of focus as it relates to also the other side that you're so clear about? That's the business side, learning about business, and culture, inspiring leadership. How would you help them balance it out today, knowing what you did and the path you took?

John Meis: I think the first handful of years, building your clinical skillsets is really important. If you're employed, focusing on that is super important. Maybe after you've been out three, four years, your speed is up, your tool belt is well stocked with tools and procedures that you can do, and feel comfortable, and do at a high level, then it's time to start learning about leadership, management, and so much of that can be done through books. There's just so

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many great books on the topic, that you can really move forward well with that. At the same time, you have to get out and do it. You have to take what you've learned and try it out, and see what fits, and see what doesn't, and what fits your style. It's learning by doing a lot, a lot of it, what works, what doesn't. I certainly have had some terrible leadership failures. I have let down team members in multiple ways. It wasn't perfect; it just was a steady improvement over time.

David Phelps: That's good to hear with that kind of clarity, John. Let's move closer to today. I want to talk a little bit about partners, partners in life, partners in business. You certainly have a lot of experience there with dental partners. Just for one, you were the president of Mortenson Dental Partners for a good while. How many, quote, partners were involved? In 110 plus practices, this was a large group, tell us a little bit about that framework. What were some of the advantages of having this large platform and different partners, and what were some of the disadvantages?

John Meis: Sure. The company was built with the premise that doctors would invest in the company, they would take that investment. They would take the doctors buy-in dollars and invest them in the growth of the company. The expectation was, or hope was, that every doctor would be not just a doctor, but also a partner. When you look at partners, partnerships can be tough. Some of the things that I've learned with is that just because you're an owner or a partner doesn't mean that you're a manager or a leader. Partner, in that sense, can mean I get a distribution check, not that I'm making decisions. I think when going into partnerships, there's a couple places where I see that struggle. One of the struggles is when

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there is a difference in, and this is small partnerships, two people, or three people, all the way up, is when there's a difference in work ethic, if one's willing to work harder than the rest, if that's not compensated for somehow, that's going to drive that partnership apart.

Another thing that I see in partnerships that creates a lot of conflict is when they have a difference in toleration for risk. One of the partners wants to grow, wants to invest, wants to make things happen, and the other one wants to just coast. That is also it. If there's not a mechanism to deal with that within the partnership, the partnership will break up. David, at one of our member meetings at one time, we had a group. They were two partners and they were not getting along very well. We started talking about their plan, what are they going to do with their practice, and the two of them got so upset with each other they had to leave the room. We could hear them out, fighting and yelling at each other in the hallway outside. These could be really, really, really tough. Those are the two most common pitfalls that I see.

The next one would be, would fall into that. Just because you're an owner doesn't mean that you're a manager or that you're making decisions. Having one person ultimately who's responsible for that, I think is the best way. That person has to be able to take into, peoples' points of view into account, and has to find a way to try to build consensus around the decisions they make. That's a hard job to be that one person, but that's usually what makes it work better.

David Phelps: I think you're right there. Did you find for the greater part that you were able to build in mechanisms that would flow with some of these areas that you brought up, work ethic,

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and toleration for risk, things that can change from one point to another? People change in their lives. Their circumstances change. With a partnership that's going to move through that, you had to have some kind of built-in mechanism formulation, right?

John Meis: Yes.

David Phelps: Were you able to do that, that work most of the time?

John Meis: Yeah, I would say most of the time. It's never perfect, but most of the time, yes. You talk about changes in your life. Everybody has a time when they can go full out 100%, everything in their personal life is lined up, and their health, and all of that. Then there are times when you can't. You have some distraction from home that you need to spend your time, and effort, and energy on, or you have a health issue. I had both. At one time, I wasn't able to give my 100%, or an equal amount to the practice as the partners did.

David Phelps: Yeah. Really good. Really good. Tell us a little bit about Smart Choice Dentistry today, and then let's also talk about Team Training Institute. Where are you projecting yourself for the future? What's driving you, John Meis? You've accomplished so much. What gets you up every day? What excites you about what you're doing, the people you're working with, the people you're helping? What is it that's getting you, moving you forward? It seems like you've climbed a pretty tall mountain already.

John Meis: What has for a long time now given me the ... What gives me gas in my tank, so to say, is really watching people grow, watching them learn, watching them develop, and seeing the great things that people can do. I really like working with teams and seeing them have new

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awarenesses, new understanding, and then make something out of, something really magical happen where there wasn't anything before. That's really what drives me. The two companies that I run allow me to do that in different ways, but they're complimentary ways as well.

David Phelps: John, where do you see dentistry going over the next maybe five, ten years? We've obviously seen a lot of change and we see a lot of change that's happening today with insurance having more and more control, and in many cases marginalizing and commoditizing our practices today. We see larger group practices, part of which you've been very successful in, that are also growing more and more. Where do you see things going? Is there going to be a shift or a fallout? Is there going to be, you think, less of the small solo practitioner that we knew decades ago? How should people that are in the profession today, how do you think they need to be thinking to position themselves for the changes you see? We can't stay static. We have to choose many times a day. That's a big question. I'll let you play with that a little bit.

John Meis: I think we're going to continue to see the advancement of technology. There are so many things that are just on the cusp of coming out, technology and equipment, and also in science. One of the people that I follow that's a futurist, so to say, he continually talks about how using the technology of today, because it's so much better than the technology of the past, will drive technological advances much, much faster. Now we know so much more about DNA for instance, and how we're going to be able to effect basically the building blocks of people and the bugs that attack them. I think there's going to be a tremendous amount of technology change in the next 10 years.

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On the insurance front, I think that at some point, and I think we're really, pretty quite close to that, that there's going to be an equilibrium reached, that the penetration of the PPOs is going to level out. Remember, those insurance companies need providers just as much as we need them. I think we're coming very close to an equilibrium state. We have the sense and the feeling that our reimbursement is dropping like a rock. One of the largest DSOs in the United States did a very exhaustive study on their reimbursement levels and what the trends were. What they were seeing was the trend was maybe slightly down, but just slightly down, whereas it had been going down pretty rapidly before. I think we're starting to hit the level spot there, which I think is very, very positive.

The third thing that you mentioned is the emergence of group practices. I think that that is going to continue. I don't think it's going to replace mom-and-pops. I think mom-and-pops will always be around, but I think there'll be more of the dental marketplace will be in group practices, whether they be dentist owned and run, or whether they be private equity owned and managed. I think you're going to see the growth of both. I think in the next 10 years, we'll certainly see one of these big groups go public, and I think will probably be the first one there, as you may have read. They just had a equity event where they brought in another private equity firm. I'd be very surprised if they weren't doing that in preparation for an IPO.

David Phelps: All right. Last question for you. John, do you believe that the return on investment is there for a young doctor who graduates from school today with half a million dollars in debt?

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John Meis: The answer to that's a tough one, because if that person is going to have a career in dentistry, and is going to practice full-time, and is going to learn and develop, I do think it's there. Where I start to wonder is there's an awful lot of part-time dentists now. It's a new phenomena in dentistry. Most pediatric dentists don't work more than two or three days a week, for instance. There's these part-timers that I'm curious to see how that pans out, if it's going to turn out to be a good investment for them or not.

David Phelps: Yeah. It is a tough question. I think each person's going to have to really learn to evaluate that. All right, Dr. John Meis. Where is the best place for people to connect with you on either of your platforms, Smart Choice Dentistry, Team Training Institute? What's the best way for people to follow you, and catch up with you, your events, training, all kinds of things out there?

John Meis: I think the best thing to do would be to just go to the website for the Team Training Institute, and that is theteamtraininginstitute.com. While you're there, you can order one of my books. I'll pay for the book if you pay for the postage. I think the postage is \$6.95 or something like that. If somebody gets on there and pays for the postage then we'll send them a book. The book is how to double or triple your production. It's a really good look at some of the core concepts of what Wendy and I teach in order to improve practice productivity. You'll learn a lot about us then, by reading that book. There's a lot of information on the website, and if you have more interest, our phone number's on the website, and you can call, talk to one of our production specialists that will help you evaluate where your practice is and how we might be able to help you.

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David Phelps: Excellent. John, I thoroughly enjoyed some time with you this afternoon. I think our listeners hopefully got some really good nuggets from you. You're definitely a man ... I would call you somewhat a pioneer in the industry. You've done a lot; you continue to contribute so much to our profession. It's just a pleasure to know you, pleasure to have you on the podcast today. Thanks so much for your time.

John Meis: You're very welcome, David. Thank you.

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