

## Ep #183: Dustin Burleson - Follow the Majority at Your Own Risk



### **Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

**Dr. David Phelps**

**[Dentist Freedom Blueprint](#) with Dr. David Phelps and Evan Harris**

## Ep #183: Dustin Burleson - Follow the Majority at Your Own Risk

Dustin: Start with yourself. I mean, we're all our biggest competitor mentally. We get in our own way. Most of us are the bottleneck in our businesses. We think we'll hire an associate when it's the perfect time and that never exists. We think we'll write a book. When someone comes and knocks on our door and says, "Hey, it's time for you to write your book." The reality is you and I, everyone listening, we're the reason why we haven't done those things.

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.

Dr. Phelps: Good day everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps of the Freedom Founders Mastermind Community and Dentist Freedom Blueprint Podcast. With me today is someone who I've really grown to respect a great deal not because of everything he's done, which he has done a lot, but really more so for who he is. I think you'll be very interested in hearing the story of this colleague of ours and what he's accomplished in a relatively short period of time.

It didn't come easy. It came with a lot of work. It came with a lot of intentionality. Without further ado let me introduce my guest today, Dr. Dustin Berleson. Dustin, how are you doing, Sir?

Dustin: Great. Thanks for having me, David.

Dr. Phelps: Dustin, it would take me probably the whole podcast to read through your resume. You're a very humble guy, but I'm going to hit some key points so people know a little bit about you, and then maybe we'll dig a little bit deeper in some of the things that

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we feel like are interesting for our guest listeners to hear about today.

For those of you who don't know Dustin, he is an orthodontist. He's a speaker, teacher, author, and he's also the founding of Burleson Orthodontics and Pediatric Dentistry in 2006. He has accomplished much and has many orthodontists who come from all over the world to come and look over his shoulder and see how he runs things in a multipractice organization of Kansas City, Missouri. He writes five professional newsletters monthly. He is the director of the Leo Rheam Foundation for Cleft and Craniofacial Orthodontics, teaches at both Children's Mercy Hospital and the UMKC School of Dentistry. He's the author of two Amazon best selling consumer books, Stop Hiding Your Smile and The Consumer's Guide to Invisalign and also a best selling orthodontic practice management book, The Ortho Manifesto.

In the past few years Dustin and his organization have been named the two time Inc. 500 and 5000 honorary recognized for building one of the fastest growing orthodontic specialty practices in North America. His marketing strategies have generated over 300 million dollars in revenue for his orthodontic clients in his privately held practices.

In his free time ... This is what I got to talk to you about, Dustin, your free time because you do a lot of stuff. In his free time, Dustin enjoys sailing, jumping out of airplanes. You got some extra insurance for that, I guess, but sounds fun. Racing exotic cars through the desert. Traveling the globe. He consistently reads over 30 journals per month. This is another area I got to talk to you about today. Four newspapers per day. Fifty or more books per year and publishes four monthly newsletters.

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Also in a tightly intensive vote he was recently named the best dad in the world by two-thirds of his children. Well done, Sir. Well done. I know that going into dentistry was hardly an option for you. Your family consists of, I think, 12 others that have been involved in dentistry. Is that correct?

Dustin: Yeah. I grew up with it in my blood literally. Everyone's a dentist, a lot of tooth talk.

Dr. Phelps: You came from a family background of business. You also studied marketing in school. Then when you got out you started a scratch ortho practice in about 2006. Is that about the year?

Dustin: That's exactly right. Yeah. Perfect timing.

Dr. Phelps: Yeah. Perfect timing. Right. You got started from scratch, and it wasn't so darn easy, was it?

Dustin: No. Our first month we started one patient, and I went home and said, "God, we've made a horrible mistake." Second month we started zero patients. I thought, "Yeah, this is going to be harder than I thought it was going to be." We used to call the telephone companies to make sure the phones were on. They said, "Yeah, they're on." I said, "Well, they're not ringing."

Dr. Phelps: What was it that you figured out was not being instituted because obviously there's a ton of stress, a lot of financial stress. Obviously you got some debt going into starting a practice up. You've got a family, bills to pay, so lots of stress. What were some of the keys that got you turning things around? What steps did you start to take to move the needle?

Dustin: Yeah, I mean necessity is the mother of invention. We started looking around at what everyone else was doing, and we were just doing the same stuff everyone else was, so our hours were similar, the services we provided were similar, our prices were

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similar, the customer service was similar. You know, we didn't answer the phones at lunch like most dentists don't answer the phones at lunch, which is exactly when most parents call.

We were closed on Friday. We weren't open on Saturdays. We were closed at 4:30. We took our last new patient at like 1:00 or 2:00 in the afternoon. Then 2008 happened and we had to get really serious about either facing bankruptcy or fixing all that.

I stumbled across a guy you and I both know very well named Dan Kennedy who kind of opened my eyes to people like Earl Nightingale and really smart marketers and really what I would consider behavioral scientists. We started doing the opposite. We stayed open late. We opened early. We started guaranteeing results, telling patients if you're not happy, we'll give you your money back. No one else in our town was doing that. We were open on Fridays. No one else was open Fridays. We were open through lunch. We were open on the weekends.

The funny thing is my parents and grandparents taught me these things years ago. I just ignored it. My grandfather had an eighth grade education, was a coal miner, and built a large series of auto parts stores. My father grew up in a house without running water until third grade. They literally used an outhouse. There were a lot of humble beginnings in our family, and they always taught me, "Listen, if you want to beat the competition, you can't be open the same hours they're open. You can't do the same things they do."

We started taking on all the difficult cases in town. I got involved with the cleft palate team, started doing a lot of surgery cases, treated over 1,200 TMD patients. A lot of orthodontists were actually referring us their most difficult cases because we were young and hungry. That was what kind of trended around. We just started doing things really, really differently.

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Dr. Phelps: You said something I think is really key. I don't want people to miss it. You said you started doing the opposite. Doing the opposite of what the majority does. That's something that as you said one of our mentors Dan Kennedy says all the time. If you want to be successful in life and you follow the majority, you're going to get majority's results, average at best. Who wants to be average?

It's difficult, Dustin, isn't it at least initially to go against the grain, to be a contrarian, to be different? You have to not only convince yourself it's the right move, but you got to convince people around you. You've got a team, you got staff, you got people around you that also have to buy in. How do you get that buy in?

Dustin: Start yourself. We're all our biggest competitor mentally. We get in our own way. Most of us are the bottleneck in our businesses. We think we'll hire an associate when it's the perfect time, and that never exists. We think we'll write a book when someone finally comes and knocks on our door and says, "Hey, it's time for you to write your book." We think we'll volunteer and teach at the university when someone comes and asks us. The reality is, you know, you and I, everyone listening, we're the reason why we haven't done those things.

For me, it started with my own mindset, and I had to get really, really comfortable with some of my peers thinking that we were just batshit crazy. I was the cute, young kid on the block that everyone admired for his hard work ethic until we massively grew the business, added locations, added doctors, and we're doing ten times the revenue of most of our competitors, and that's where it stings because you're going to get a peer who complains to the dental board about your marketing. You're going to get a peer who tells all of your friends in the profession

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that you are never satisfied, that you're too driven, that you're a workaholic.

You got to just put blinders on and go do your thing. You got to totally ignore all of that noise and distraction.

Dr. Phelps: That's solid advice. Where do you feel like we are with the state of the industry? We can say healthcare in general, but we can be more specific and talk about dentistry, orthodontics. Where are we at the state of the industry? What's the big wave trend that you see, Dustin, and what are you doing or what do you think people who want to stay in the private sector of healthcare should be doing if they're not already doing it?

Dustin: Yeah, I love this question. You might guess my answer is going to sound a lot different than all the doom and gloom we hear from a lot of consultants in our space. If you just pick up a trade journal or you go to a meeting, you hear a lot of negativity. We disagree. I think right now across the board our clients are having their best years ever. Consumers are spending. If you'll let them spend the way they want to spend ... In other words, if your hours of operation, your removal of risk, and your added value are in line with what consumers want, you can be literally killing it right now.

The bad news really is that we are, I think, on a slow march towards a single payer system in healthcare. I think there will be continued consolidation. I think there's going to be continued burden of adding new regulations and taxes. I think Obama added 8,000 pages of regulations. Trump is busy taking a machete to a lot of those. We're got a four year reprieve, hopefully an eight year reprieve.

Listen, if someone like Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders gets elected quickly, we'll be locked into one way track to socialism and more entitlements without getting political. I'm

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very pro entrepreneur. I'm pro small business owner. If you look back, my dad was a dentist back in the 70s. If you at what paperwork and what tax burden and what regulatory burden we put up with today versus what you put up with 30 or 40 years ago, it's a much more competitive environment. It's a much more difficult environment.

It's going to be harder and harder to survive as a solo practitioner in healthcare, but I think for the top 5 or 10% who will take it seriously, actually there's going to be very, very good years ahead for them.

Dr. Phelps: Yeah, I agree with you. Dustin, I get the chance as you do to travel a fair amount and travel outside of our country. I meet oftentimes in travels and have a chance to even visit with I would call the business entrepreneurs from countries that do not have the freedom we have even more recently or still to great extent have socialism communism. Yet, they are in their country and their world, maybe it's the niched 5%. I don't know what it is. There's always a way even in the greatest of burdens, the greatest of oppression if you want to call it that, to rise and shine. It's a small percentage of people that will actually rise above that. The rest of the people fall in the majority. They fall into the victim mindset as we see a lot of whining and complaining today about whatever, insurance or competition or regulation or taxation. Everybody has to deal with it. It's just are you going to position yourself to take advantage of the opportunities and differentiate yourself, not only in your services you provide, but in your mindset.

Do you agree?

Dustin: Totally. If we're honest with ourselves, we're all spoiled. We live in the greatest country in the world, people listening to this in the U.S. You and I both know a gentleman named Frank



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Merenda through Dan Kennedy's world. When I went and spoke with Frank, there are 3,000 small business owners who were stuck in an auditorium for three days and wouldn't get up to use the restroom, would barely take a lunch break, and come right back in. We forget in the second world war, Mussolini was very different type of leader than what we have and what we're used to in our country. Capitalism and entrepreneurial spirit is alive and thriving in so many areas outside the U.S. that we forget what our country and the people who fought for it, the price they paid and how fortunate we are to live in this country.

I mean, everybody wants an easy button. Everybody wants to be thin and rich. No one wants to put in the effort. Our top clients are the ones that see that landscape, understand the challenges, wake up excited everyday to go tackle those challenges. They're enthusiastic about their future. They love what they do. They realize that's the game. The game is the journey. We joke and say you wouldn't go to the symphony and just ask if you could listen to the last note. You wouldn't go read your favorite novel and skip to the last paragraph. Why do we want to do that in our business?

We all want to get to this endpoint, but we realize, listen, as soon as you get there there's more horizon in front of that. I see that a lot in our foreign clients that are hungry, they're great students, and they mimic a lot of the behavior of our top U.S. clients. Bottom line, the average small business owner in this country, I hate to say it, is going to be completely annihilated by the Amazons of the world, the Aspen Dentals of the world. You've got to take it more seriously.

Dr. Phelps: You cannot be complacent. That's for sure. You got to continue to learn and invest in yourself, invest in your company. You cannot just sit back on your heels and just let everything else run over you. What doctors, dentists, orthodontists, have

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difficulty, Dustin, in I think is exhibiting value. You talked about some of the differentiators that you saw quickly to turn around what your practice was early in the mid 2000s and being similar to everybody else, similar hours, similar services, similar pricing, and you figured out that you had to go against the grain to differentiate yourself.

Value is in the eye of the beholder. I think that a lot of people feel like insurance today for one is a big driver of pricing. We have a lot of docs who complain because their margins are shrinking because they find the necessity of utilizing insurance as a driver for their patients. What would you say about value differentiation and how broad a base is there for dentists and orthodontists to actually connect with, engage to market to those who would find value in other than what's the cheapest I can get by on?

Dustin: If anyone listening to this is upset with the lifetime client value in their practice or upset with the reality that insurance does drive a lot of patients to a lot of practices, very mediocre margins, here is the reality. You and I are responsible for those patients we attract. Right? You don't have to sell Rolls Royce treatment for Kia prices. You can decide to sell Rolls Royce treatment to Rolls Royce buyers if you so choose.

We started off with our business very similar to everyone else. We took a lot of insurance programs. We started looking at the data. The data are overwhelming in support of how we do it now. Patients who've found us based on insurance were four times less likely, not 4%, not 40%, but 400% less likely to refer a friend or family member because they were going wherever the insurance was accepted. When we wanted to build a business, it was a lot more stable than, "Oh crap, Met Life just cut our fees, I guess I have to let one of my assistants go. I guess I have to change my fee structure.

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We got real serious about bypassing insurance, bypassing traditional methods of attracting new patients, and we started going straight to consumer much like the pharmaceutical companies did. We got really smart at direct mail. We got really smart at direct response radio. We got really smart at targeted T.V. ads. I mean, today there's only so many people that are going to go into Google and search for an orthodontist. They might have heard about you from a referring dentist, maybe you're on their insurance list, but that's a very finite number.

There are probably hundreds of thousands of people or millions of people in most of our markets of the clients we work with who wake up today and could be stimulated to think about coming to the orthodontist, could be stimulated to think about going to a dentist. If Southwest Airlines only relied on people that were going to Southwest.com today, I mean they'd be selling one-tenth of the tickets because they're everywhere. They're omnipresent, but, hey, you deserve a vacation. You should fly with us on television and print and radio and online. We bypass the traditional methods.

If you're not happy with the fees your insurance company is allowing you to charge, go around it. Go find patients on your own. We can do it. Our system, we've proven we can do it.

Dr. Phelps: Your multipractices are really elaboratory for everything that you teach. You start there. You prove the systems, the marketing, the automation that you put in place, team training, all those things, it's right there. It's not something that you've just studied, but you've actually implemented and that gives you not only the credibility but also the ability to help transform first of all the thinking of practice owners, the mindset as we talked about, but also then to change and transform their practices and the practices that actually have real profitability and start to

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produce income, time off, and just a lot more options than they feel like they have today.

Dustin, what are some of the biggest or most common mistakes that you feel like the rank and file practice owners make today? If you could list one, two, or three, what are your top?

Dustin: The biggest one I see right now is 20 years ago you could get by with hanging a shingle and accepting whatever walked in your practice and treating people nicely and doing good quality care. There's a heck of a lot more competition today. Consumers are a heck of a lot more distracted. The problem I see, a word you mentioned earlier, is that very few small business owners including dentists, orthodontists, and the people we work with including audiologists, dermatologists, physicians, and plastic surgeons, they don't set intentional goals.

They try to do it incrementally better. They'll look at for example at the time of this recording they might say, "Okay, third quarter last year we did X, let's try to do a little bit more than X, or let's try not to do worse." No one is setting a sales forecast. Things that we learned in dental school were just enough to not kill someone. Then we get into private practice and we realize we have zero skillset to run a business. The things we work with our clients that I see most of them completely missing is actually setting out a forecast of what revenue will be this year, this quarter, this month, and then assigning either through incentives or through responsibilities who's going to be tracking down and chasing down those goals. What must we do? What actions are required?

The first meeting I have with most clients is how big do you want this thing to be? Our average client is around 2.5 million dollar practice. Most want to get to five to six million. If we set

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that as a goal, we've got to say, "Here's the sales forecast. Here's how many new patients based on your data you must get in the door. Here's how many must convert into new patients."

What does that look like? Well, that looks like you don't have enough hours, you don't have enough chairs, you don't have enough assistance. We need to add a location. We need to add a day. We work back from the objective instead of intentionally. Most of us we get to the end of the month and go, "Well, how'd we do?" That's way too late in the game.

Dr. Phelps: I know it.

Dustin: You should never have a bad month. You should have like a bad half day, and you should fix it by the end of the day. You should have a bad half week and fix it by the end of the week. It's just being more intentional.

Dr. Phelps: More intentional. You said reverse engineer. It's math. Once you have the deliverables in place you can fulfill, it's math. Marketing math, you can make it happen. Very good.

Somewhere down the road eight years plus after the 2008 correction, market downturn, say 2010 was maybe the bottom of it, somewhere there. We've been running eight years maybe in this kind of bull run economy. Everything seems to be up. As you mentioned, Trump is pushing back and taking a machete to the regulations. There is a lot of business and consumer confidence, which is good, which is great. People should be making hay wall to sunshine. No doubt about it. I don't think it will last forever. I'm not a pessimist. I'm not negative. I'm just a realist. What would you tell business owners, practice owners today if there are some key fundamentals that they should have into place to weather a storm like we had back in 2008? What are some keys, Dustin, that you would tell them to prep for?

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Dustin: First, be realistic. We are pushing the longest ... You know this data better than I do. The longest continuous run up was in the 90s. The dot com burst about 120 months of consecutive economic growth. At the time of this recording, listen, we could be doing a whole lot worse. I'm not going to complain, 4.1% GDP. If you peel back the curtain a little bit, you got to be a realist. We're collecting record taxes in this country, but we still have a record deficit. It spills over into consumer trends as well. Right?

If you look at consumer debt, nonmortgage debt, car loans, credit cards, personal loans, student loans, that now accounts for 10% of consumer income. That's insane. It's been steadily growing since around 2012, I think. At the end of this year we predict we're going to be at four trillion dollars of consumer debt, nonmortgage debt. Unless we see some real wage growth that would give consumers a little more margin to spend, we're telling our clients, "Listen, hold off on capital improvement expenditures. Repair what you can. Get another year added to your x-ray machine. Get another year out of that chair. Take every windfall and stash it away so that when the next recession does occur, you can behave exactly the opposite of everyone else."

You can invest in marketing. You could expand your hours. I was just dumbfounded. The last economic recession, no offense to the American Association of Orthodontists, I respect what they do, I've served on boards and committees, all respect goes to these people who serve on these positions, but their first piece of advice in the last economic downturn was to rent a smaller space, fire several of your staff members, close a day of the week. I mean, this is just dumb, dumb advice, an exact opposition of how smart companies behave.

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If you can be realistic and I think keep personal expenses to 35% of net income, that gives you 40% for taxes. It gives you another 25% margin for investing given an emergency. You're going to be safe through any storm. The problem I see people do is they assume we're going to continue on this growth trajectory, and they go and buy a new Porsche, and they buy a second home, and they buy some new cone beam in their office and things hit and those payments don't stop when shit hits the fan. I would put windfalls aside. I mean, listen we are flirting with completely unrealistic long-term growth if you think we're going to go another 10 years without a recession.

The problem making predictions is no one ever goes back and checks whether your predictions were right or wrong. I would absolutely recommend all clients be very, very pragmatic about how much further growth there is left in this run.

Dr. Phelps: Good advice. That's really what I tell to all our folks as well, Dustin, is creating more margin right now is definitely the key to being ready, take it on, survive it, and come out on the other side like gangbusters. Good stuff.

I mentioned in the intro that you read a lot of material, many journals, newspapers. You also are a great publisher. With all the things you do, how do you decide what you read and how do you curate the most relevant information for you? There's information, we have overload today. It's everywhere. Right? How do you decide what you want to take in and how do you get through it, so much reading a month?

Dustin: You've got to have some pretty quick litmus tests. I skim real quick the newspapers I read. For my litmus test is, does this matter, and if so, how much? To me it matters if it can help impact a client, my own businesses, my family, my employees, my community. If there's something to be learned, listen there's

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a ton of data out there. You're right. You could be overwhelmed with analysis paralysis. If you study the most successful people on the planet, Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, Jobs before he passed away, Zuckerberg, all these people, they're not walking around on their Smartphones. They're reading real content from real journalists from real business thinkers, from successful people. The quickest advice I could tell you is get rid of your Smartphone or at least don't start your day with it if you won't do that. I haven't had a Smartphone for five years. I don't miss it. I would never go back to getting one.

Don't start your day with someone else's agenda. Wake up with your intentional agenda. I'm going to look for things that impact my investments, my family, my businesses, my employees, my clients. Then if that fits the criteria, it passes the litmus test, does this matter? Yeah, then I read the whole thing. I mean, no one has time to read four newspapers every day cover to cover. You've got to skim and get important information. Same with books. Most dentists don't realize that their dental school library usually has a service. If there's some topic you're interested in ... For example, maybe you're interested in laser dentistry or you're interested in Airway, or maybe like me you do a lot of cleft lip and palate work, you can have your local librarian keep you on a list of new things that come out in that area. University of KC, they'll actually Xerox it and mail it to me. It's amazing. They'll send a PDF via email. Google alerts will do the same thing. If you got stocks that you want to really pay attention to, put them on a Google alert and have those things brought to you.

It's got to be intentional. There's no doubt. You can't just wake up and listen to or watch. Definitely turn off the morning news. That is a waste of your time. Turn off your Facebook feed. Getting news from there is a waste of your time. Be more intentional. Real news sources like the New York Times,



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Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, your local newspaper, or perhaps the Financial Times is a brilliant publication. Skim those for relevancy. Then dig deep.

Dr. Phelps: Good. Good Dustin. Is there a mentor or maybe a book that you've not necessarily read recently or it could be that has been particularly relevant or changing in the terms of the way you think? Is there anything that you would put out in that regard?

Dustin: There's a lot. Currently I think one of the brightest thinkers is Ryan Holiday. We were fortunate enough to interview him for our Burleson Box. We do a quarterly box that has two books and study guides and action cards, and then an interview with me and the author. We send those out to clients every quarter. Ryan is one of those. He comes from kind of a deep curiosity with stoicism. I would advise people, "Listen, I read a lot. A lot of books show up on my desk because we're curating for clients." I would look at things that have been around for longer than 10 to 20 years. Go look at the things that have stimulated all the other books. It's fine to go to Barnes & Noble and pick three or four books that are new, but go back and look at stuff that's been around for a couple hundred years. Go back and read meditations by Marcus Aurelius, and then get your hands on Ryan Holiday's books about stoicism called *The Obstacle is the Way*, and *Ego is the Enemy*. Really, really smart stuff.

Then I kind of rabbit hole it. If I find an article or a book or a drama that's fascinating, the quickest way to get a real good understanding of all that is to go to the references section and look for common names. Once you see some person's name five or six times amongst five or six references, you know that's kind of a thought leader in that area. Go pool their articles. Then probably five hours you know more than 98% of the population on that topic because you just dug a little deeper. It

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doesn't mean I don't read new stuff, but I go back and look at some of the old stuff as well.

Dr. Phelps: Classic. Really good. Dustin, one of the things that you do very well is you donate a lot of money, capital, to specific charities. You give back a lot. In fact, I know that the proceeds from your coach in consulting, specifically go to The Leo Rheam Foundation for Cleft and Craniofacial Orthodontics. Give me a little bit more about that. Why is that a big passion for you? Obviously, it's part of what you do, your specialty. Is there anything else about that? Has there been experience in your life that's just really led to really want to pour into that particular foundation?

Dustin: Without getting metaphysical and whoo whoo on people or religious, I do think you can go and just read some pragmatic things from either Catherine Power or Edward Kramer, you know, the hole you give through is the hole you receive through. That's always been true in my life. I've never said, "Well, I'll start giving money when I have money." I gave it when I had none. I think that is important for your peace of mind, for how you see the world. You see it with abundance instead of being extremely competitive with it.

It's fascinating when we attached our business and our goals to donating more care through Smiles Change Lives or throughout our own cleft palate foundation, it's easier to talk to employees about, "Hey, we're going to treat 10,000 kids through Smiles Changes Lives." That's a higher sense of purpose than, "Hey, we're going to chase down 10 million bucks this year."

I think everyone needs to be aligned with a higher sense of purpose. There's a lot of cliché things like you're not going to take it with you when you die. You've never seen a U-Haul behind a hearse, but if you'll attach your company to some

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higher sense of purpose, and all the best companies do it, Buffet does it with Brookshire Hathaway. Apple and Disney do it. Starbucks does it. You'll give your employees a much longer runway.

We started implementing these concepts. We saw employee retention and employee engagement go up. There's tangible benefits to being a charitable organization. There's no doubt.

Dr. Phelps: Dustin, excellent. Lots of great tips, insights into your life, what makes things work for you, what you've figured out, definitely not being a mainstream follow the majority guy, that's what I love about you and respect about you. I appreciate your time today. Thanks so much for all you do.

Dustin: Thank you, and thanks for all your doing. You're helping a lot of dentists and a lot of orthodontists retire with a lot more stability and a lot sooner. We appreciate you.

Dr. Phelps: Thanks Dustin. Talk to you soon.

Dustin: All right. Thanks, David.

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