

Ep #237: Andre Shirdan - Rowing in the Same Direction - The Crew Process



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David Phelps: Well, good day everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps of the Freedom Founders Mastermind community Dentist Freedom Blueprint podcast.

Here with, one of my good friends, colleagues in the industry, who has been really helping dentists in their crews. And I say the word crew because there's a reason why I say crew and not team or staff, but helping the crews with the overall practice philosophy.

So let me jump right in so we know who we're talking to, and then I'll get into some of the meat of what we want to discuss today. So Andre Shirdan. Andre, how are you doing today, sir?

Andre Shirdan: I'm doing great. It's great to catch up with you again. We haven't seen each other for a while.

David Phelps: It's been a little while. We first got a chance to meet each other in person back in your hometown, neck of the woods in Philadelphia maybe four or five years ago. And I was really blown away by your presentation. Then I got the chance to sit with you at lunch or dinner and just talk more and just realize not like many, you have a unique background. You didn't come in to doing what you do today as a dentist, which there's nothing wrong with that.

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You came in from more of a customer service area. We'll get to that because I think it's important for people to know your history and kind of what led you to do what you do today.

But let's talk about the word crew. One of many things you've developed, but I think the one that you're most known for, is the crew process, which is really all about your philosophy of practice and bringing on that crew, that team, to build that culture and all the systems and processes. And whether it's technology or marketing, call it sales, treatment planning, all of those things that have to go into place to make a solid, optimized, fun, lower stress practice environment, which is what everybody wants today. We all want that. But it seems like it's so hard to achieve.

And let me also say that, Andre, so I said I heard him speak first several years ago. I heard you speak several times now. And you're motivational. You're inspirational. You're humorous, which is always fun. The entertainment side, which you got to have if you're going to connect with people. You're a certified trainer, executive coach. And you've really been doing this, evolving as we all do, since about 1989.

So do you want to give us a little bit of that backstory. I think I had you on... I looked it up today, Andre. You were podcast number 104. We're up to something like 220 or so. So it's time to have you back, sir. Time to have you back.

Andre Shirdan: That's great. Yeah. Well, when I started in this business, and as of March of 2019, it's been 30 years. When I

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started, I started working for my personal dentist, who then married my sister.

So I got pulled into this as a family business, and it was pretty much myself, my brother in law, and we had a chairside assistant. We only had two chairs. So consistency between the three people in the office was not a big deal once I learned his practice philosophy. I came from a world of really high end customer service and sales. And when I came to work for him, I was completely blind to what we now do in the dental world. Learning the dental thing and scratching my head the whole way through it, saying, "I can't believe this is the way you guys do things." All I saw was from the side of being a patient. And then reading books and going to courses, he was a CE junky, so we went to every single CE course that we could possibly find.

And then all I kept hearing throughout the industry was, "Well, we can't do it that way" or "We don't do it that way." And my theory was "Why not?" I mean, in my experience, I was trained by Disney. I Was trained by Ritz Carlton. I was trained by a lot of the big corporations, and I didn't understand why dentistry was sort of this closed environment.

So I kept saying, "Of course you can do it differently. Of course you can do it differently." And the one consistent thing that I found was nobody was consistent. And that led me to coming up with some protocols in both clinically and from a practice management standpoint. Back then, '89, we were just getting into computerizing the office and becoming consistent. We were entering data consistent with what we were charting, consistent with the way that

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from hygienist to hygienist, assistant to assistant, doctor to doctor, we would enter that data and review that data. And that's where crew came from. It came from...

Philadelphia is a big rowing town. Getting everybody on the same page, everybody rowing at the same pace, everybody hitting the water at the same time, pulling at the same time and having the same outcome in mind. And that's what it was all about.

David Phelps: So that's really interesting that you, as you said you, you came into dentistry eyes wide open from where you'd come from Disney, Ritz Carlton, all of that customer service, and the fact that you kept hearing, "Well, we've never done it that way. We can't do it that way." I think that's one of the first road blocks that everybody needs to be challenged in their own lives, their own businesses, is that there are other ways to do it, but we have to be open to those changes.

So how did that work out in your brother-in-law's practice then? Because here's what I know, we're talking to people that may be the owners of the practice. They may be the leaders of that practice. And you may have an idea, you may have read a book, you may have heard you speak, Andre, by yourself without your staff there, and you go back, "I want that." So now you have to go back and what? Sell it to the team and the crew.

So going back to your start, how does this transformation happen? Because it doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen by just having a little team morning huddle and saying, "We're gonna do things differently." How do you get the buy in? How do you start building that culture? That's a lot in there, and I know we could talk days on

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this. But even some of the pieces you know that seem to stop most practices from getting from where they are today, point A to point B, whatever they visualize their ideal to be.

Andre Shirdan: Yeah. Well the first thing I do whenever I've worked with an office is the first thing I did when I worked with my brother-in-laws. I said, tell me what your philosophy of care is. And he sort of turned, and I could tell he was sort of turning in his chair at this calligraphy piece that he had created at some consulting meeting. And I looked over and I said, "Are you going to pull that down and read it to me?" And he said, "Well, that kind of drives what we're doing, because that's kind of our vision statement and our mission statement." And I said, "But you can't tell me without looking at it."

And I said, "I need you in less than six words to be able to tell me about your practice philosophy of care." And we got it down to six words, and it was really about... Back then it was about gentle care and family care. That was the way we kind of spoke back in the early nineties about dentistry. But it clarified it for me to be able to then have... Again, I was doing all the treatment planning. Being able to explain to our patients we start from a family oriented — and I'm just gonna make that up as I go along — a family oriented dental care situation. And that's the thing I've done for the last 30 years is I go into a practice and I say to a doctor "Tell me about your practice in six words or less. Because if you can't, how are you going to hire hygienists who then can match your philosophy of care? How are we going to bring on an associate who can't match your philosophy of care? And how do you

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treatment plan if your patients don't understand that philosophy of care?"

So that's where it started from. And now, it's funny now with Facebook and Instagram and those kinds of things, we see these quotes we had from Walt Disney. We see these quotes from Steve Jobs. And it's funny because people love to catch onto these phrases or these quotes that were made, but those quotes really tell you about that person's philosophy of their business. And it's tough to get in the dental field, somebody to just be very clear about where they stand in philosophy.

The biggest joke is four out of five dentists will agree with something and usually that fifth dentist everybody hates. But if we can get everybody at least in a single practice on the same page, then we can build marketing programs. We can build an employee manual. We can build all these things behind that. But everybody has to be rowing in the same direction.

David Phelps: So to make that happen, to get everybody on the same page rowing the same direction, one might go through quite possibly some changes in who's rowing or what seats they're rowing in. That's gotta be part of it, right? And I think that's an area that most of us who have been highly trained in something, in this case, clinical expertise in dentistry, that's not our forte. And I'm sure you get this all the time. Great, wonderful people who care, doctors who are treating patients with with great expertise. But we just really haven't learned how to build that team or culture.

So I assume that a big piece of what you do to help crews row in the same direction, getting the buy in, developing

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the practice philosophy, is helping the owner doctor to develop better communication skills, better leadership skills. What does that entail? On average some are going to be better or faster than others, and are there some that just seem to self-sabotage the process itself because they don't want to go there or they make up excuses why this can't happen? Give me some of that because I know it's out there and I know you.

Andre Shirdan: It's tough because and I recently took a trip with an entire office. We actually left the office, well actually left the country together. So we were all together. And the doctor pretty much had a meltdown in the middle of the trip because I kept pressing him to stop with all the gobbledygook and tell me what this practice is all about. Tell me so that we can as a group be able to get back in the office on Monday morning and be able to explain that to our patients. And finally he said, "I am not a leader. I don't want to be a leader. I just want to be the doctor." And he'd been practicing for 25 years plus with this block that he was trying to be a leader but didn't want to be.

And I said, "Do you want to give up leadership and let somebody else run it?" And he said, "Yeah, I really do." And I said, "That is what you need to do. That will make you the happiest guy in the world. You'd be able to go home at night and not even think about the leadership of the practice." And that's where we went with that practice. And I've had other doctors who say, "No, this is my game and I want to lead it and I want to be the leader." But they have to have that cathartic moment. Everybody's got to have that moment. And it's tough because as entrepreneurs we want to be the leader. We want to show that we are running the game, but not everybody's cut out

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for that. For me, it's an honesty moment, and I try and I try and I try.

It's funny, there's something I learned years ago. The shape that geese make when they fly north or south is called a sky. So I've been using this, and I actually try to create this idea of a sky method of leadership. Sometimes you don't need to be the leader full time. And a lot of times as a front office person, an office manager, I took on leadership of the practice when the doctor didn't have his gloves on. And because we shared philosophies, that worked. He gave up the relationship as leader when he put gloves on and his loops on. I never wanted him to break that focal length. So I became the leader. And somebody needed a day off, I was the person to come to. If he didn't have gloves on, they could go to him. And that was a leadership style that we learned, and we cultivate it.

But you've gotta be able to either give up the relationship as leader or you've got to be able to find the person that can help you lead and pass off that resistance to the wind, which is what geese go through. But you can't stay out front pushing against the wind all the time, especially if you don't want to be out there.

David Phelps: Yeah, that's really good Andre. There's a big difference between leadership and management. And I think again, early on until we understand really what leadership is, people think in terms of managing people. Well, that's a whole different ball game, right? I mean that's outdated. It's old, but that's the way many of us were brought up. You own or you run a company or a small business or a practice, but you need to manage these people. And

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that's the way it was for me early on. I thought, "Well, I'm supposed to be the smartest one here. I'm supposed to know everything about everything so I can be the shell answer man." Right? It's ridiculous because you can't. There's way too much to know today.

So leadership to me, Andre, and you'll probably say it better than I will, but isn't leadership a big part of that is certainly helping the crew. And again, this has to be done together. But develop that practice philosophy. If you build the vision, what's this practice about? Who are we going to serve? Building that together. And then leadership has to entail elevating that crew to, as you said, the right people to elevate certain places so that that leader doesn't necessarily have to, you'll quote, "manage or do all things," right? And there it is again. It depends on who the person is.

Your point about the doctor and team who you were with and having that honesty moment about really what did he really want. And he'd probably never had that discussion with anybody. He always thought he had to be this and your moment of clarity with him let him let him actually breathe and go "I don't have to be that. If I want to just focus on dentistry, there's a way to make that happen that I don't have to try to be all these things that I don't want to be." So what say you on some of that. You'll say it better than I will.

Andre Shirdan: Again, I've walked in offices and offices from two operatories where I started to. I have a 26 operatory practice I work with, and leadership is different in each of those places. One thing in our big office, one thing that's really neat is I found this just orange dot. I don't know

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where it came from, but it was kind of like a like somebody might buy from staples. But it was just an orange sticker, and it was a little circle, maybe about a half inch round. And I stuck at the highest corner of the... They have like a conference room, and I stuck it as high up in the corner of a room as I could find. And when the noise started getting crazy, I would say everybody look at the dot, and all of a sudden all eyes would go there and I'd go, "That's what we have to keep doing."

We have to keep finding a way to get focused back on what we need to do. What is our goal? Okay, we want to make \$10 million this year. Okay, great. Look at the dot. Everybody look there and let's figure out how do we get to that end point. And Tony Robbins is great for that. Where there's this great... And he does this thing where he claps and everybody sort of focuses back on the stage. One of my favorite preachers, Charles Stanley, does that. He says something, and it'll be to get everybody back on path. When you find leadership, you find a point of reference that people go to, a goal that everybody leads towards.

In rowing, there's a finish line that we always have to hit. And if everybody is rowing — again, I'm going to use that analogy — everybody's rowing at the same pace, that ship will make it on a very true course to the end point. But in dentistry, we tend to let people get on a ship damaged. And they have a broken arm and they'll just say "Okay, well we'll still take you with a broken arm, even though you're supposed to be doing SRP today." And they're rowing cripple. And instead of saying, "Sally, your job is fine. We love you, but we're going to get a temp in so that we can have a consistent outcome," we let them

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do that. And in dentistry, we're just afraid of hurting people's feelings. And for me, one of my favorite sayings is you're allowed to be successful someplace else. You're allowed to be at home today, and your job will not be taken away from you if you come back and can do your job. There's great temp agencies. You can bring somebody in and that's okay.

We fear not having somebody be in a seat, which is crazy. So that's the whole idea behind crew. If you can't row today, that's okay. We can find somebody who can. And if this is not the right position for you, we can help you be successful someplace else. But ultimately we want to make sure that everybody's doing what they need to do and doing it consistently. And it's a shame because my favorite businesses to watch are Disney and McDonald's. And the reason I like those two is the customer service that you see from Disney, and no matter whatever anybody thinks of it, the customer service is exceptional, but their processes are long and drawn out. So I love looking at McDonald's because their processes is like an Ikea catalog, very simplistic.

So if you mix those two together, one of the things that you can see is you take Disney's customer service and McDonald's processes. Guess what you get? Chick-fil-A. And look how well that company is doing. They only make a few different items. And they do it consistently, and their outcomes are the same. And their philosophy of care is unbelievable. But those two businesses mixed together is the perfect example. And everybody who goes to Chick-fil-A understands that when you go, you expect that the people are nice, and it's the same group of kids that would have been hired at Burger King or McDonald's. It's

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the same group of kids. But they set an expectation for those kids, and they follow through with that expectation. And now their customers are getting that level of care they expect. And that's what we can do in dentistry. When everybody clicks and everybody understands the outcomes and you understand that we're going to be closed on Sunday and whatever and we're true to our goals and true to our philosophy and true to our outcomes, we get consistent results.

David Phelps: Yeah, I love that. Combining Disney and McDonald's, you get Chick-fil-A. That's a great example. Great example. Let's talk a little bit about technology because technology globally is just advancing so fast today, and we attempt to in our businesses, our practices, to incorporate the right technology at the right time. That's always... As soon as the right thing to do, good thing to do, figuring out what to add when, is there an adverse effect to technology? And if there is, Andre, how does the team, the crew, overcome that? Is there a too much reliance on technology I guess is what I'm saying.

Andre Shirdan: Well, it's funny because I've been in the business long enough to remember that when my doctor told me we were going to computers to do scheduling, I quit. I said, "This is ridiculous. I mean, this is the stupidest thing in the whole world. Why would anybody use a computer to schedule? I buy my book out in October and I'm perfectly comfortable doing my scheduling and my appointment book." And the resistance to change I understand very much. But what happens in dentistry is we change quickly, but we're always chasing the dragon. The most successful practices I know do it with meat and potatoes dentistry. It's a handpiece, gloves, and anesthesia. The

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exceptional practices that I would love to hang out in do it with great amounts of technology. No difference. But the toys are great, but they're not the thing that leads us to a better outcome.

I think we have to do technology right. And for years, I sold the technology, so CAD cam, digital x-ray software. I was part of that process of selling it. It's great. I love it. I love the toys, and my office is filled with toys. But at the same time, I love to be the second person to go first with technology. Let everybody else do it. And then let me see the ROI on it. And ROI for people is different. Is it monetary or is it going to make my job better? Or is it going to make my job more fun? Because I love having fun at work. So the ROI, and you have to be honest about it, again go back to honesty. Be honest about it. If I'm buying CAD cam, and I'm a CAD cam freak, if I buy CAD cam, is it because it's gonna make me money? Is it going to make me happy? Or is it going to the practice differently? But be honest about it. Don't say it's going to change my ROI, and then at the same time you're dumping thousands of dollars into this and not going to see that return on investment.

So technology is great, but it moves fast in dentistry, and the new shiny thing is always going to be there. So as long as it's done properly, great. My biggest fear right now is I have clients who are paying so much money just in support. It's not the technology. It's its support, and that's what they never bargained for. That's my biggest fear in technology.

David Phelps: Yeah, that often happens, doesn't it? What about the trend we have in all of healthcare? Certainly in dentistry.

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The PPO effect, managed care, the commoditization of dentistry. How do you see that overall? Obviously, it's a trend that will continue. It doesn't mean a practice or an owner has to buy into that or be slaughtered by it or have to accommodate it. But how are you talking to clients, prospective clients who are also worried about the same? And what do you see the long term for dentistry in regards to these changes that we see happening?

Andre Shirdan: Yeah. Well it's funny. The dentist who I worked for, my brother-in-law, he passed away a few years ago. And when I had to make the change to find a new dentist, he'd been my dentist for most of my life. When I had to go find a new dentist, the most interesting thing was I have MetLife through my corporation. And the first thing I thought about was where do I find a MetLife dentist who is also one of my friends. But the driving force in my decision was first and foremost my insurance. And all of a sudden it clicked what all of our patients are thinking about. And I get it, and I really do understand it. And I talk about independence from insurance on a daily basis when I talk to clients and when I do seminars. And it's a real idea, but at the same time, I don't grocery shop without first looking to see if I might have a coupon for Tide. So I understand both ends of that.

I think the future of dentistry with insurance is bleak because I do see us moving to a... Or I see all insurance companies moving to the medical insurance model. So I think we as an industry need to be prepared for the future. And being insurance-ended would be a wonderful thing, and it's a great way to be, but you've gotta be prepared for it. And this is one of the toughest conversations I have with offices. You can't fight it, but you can certainly be

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prepared for it. You live in a nice neighborhood, but you still have an alarm on the house because you're not stupid. So that's the idea. To me it's wearing your seat belt even though you're 20 miles an hour. It's having that back, and be prepared for it. And the biggest thing is don't demonize it because for your patients, as you saw for my example, your patients think it's a great thing. So it's a balancing act. But again, if philosophy, if processes are in place, you can go either way. I have practices that are successful in that network and out of network. It all depends.

David Phelps: Andre, how do you typically work with clients' offices? Is there a certain period of time you work with them or do some people want to keep you on indefinitely? Because obviously having a great consultant, a coach, a mentor, I think is highly valuable in any part of life. Whether it's personal business in this case dentistry. How do you like to work with people? How do they work with you?

Andre Shirdan: Well, I'm unique in this because I'm not a full time — and this is a weird thing to say — but I'm not a full time coach or consultant. What I do is because in 2016, I sort of officially retired, so I work now like a fireman, a volunteer fireman. A lot of people will call and they say, "Hey, I hear about you. I know what you do, and I see you online. And I love for you to work with me." And I say, "Well, tell me about your business. Tell me about how I can help," and go through the process of an interview. And a lot of times I say, "You know what? Here's somebody who I work with who I think might be a really good fit for you." Or I'll say, "You know what? I'd love to come out, meet with you and we can talk about it. Let me see how I can help you."

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But I want to work like a fireman. You've got a fire. Let me put it out for you. If we kill the fire and everything's good, then let it be like a smoke detector. If you ever feel like there's smoke in the house, give me a call. I'll come back out, and we'll do an evaluation. But you don't need a fireman sitting in your driveway all day long. I mean, that'd be really expensive to have your own fireman sitting there. Let me do this. Let me just be your go-to person if you have a problem and call, or let me give you somebody who I know can actually work with you to get you to the point where you're fire free. And if you need a fire, you give me a call.

So I've set myself up to be somebody who... I love being almost like a general contractor. I don't know how to drive a nail, but I know a guy who can do it for you. And that for me works so much better because I get to have the relationship with the offices at the same time. They're not beholden to me, and it's worked really well for me. I'm still doing about 200,000 miles a year on a plane, but I get to pick and choose and I get to make friendships, like with you. I get to have friendships with doctors and with clients across the country, and they're never feeling like they're beholden to me or me to them. So it works really well. It's totally unique in the way I do things.

David Phelps: That is unique. I like that. Thank you for sharing that with us.

So the best place to connect with you, obviously your website, the crewprocess.com. Resources there, certainly. What are the things could people to connect with you or just utilize some of what you've already created or developed if they care to do so?

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Andre Shirdan: Well, there's tons of information on the website, information you can download. My nonsurgical periodontal program, the StatCk program is there. The easiest way to get in touch with me, honestly, like you said, is to go to the website. There are — and I'm crazy about this because, again, my OCD has put me in this situation — there is actually my phone number directly in the website. There is a button that if you click your phone, you're on your mobile device, will automatically dial me. And I'm fanatical about picking up my phone when somebody calls me. And I love talking to people. I love hearing what happens in the industry, and I'm still as far as inside the industry as I can be while I sort of watched from outside of it too.

David Phelps: Well, I will say this, you're a treasure in the industry, and I love your position today as a firefighter because you have that ability. You can see from that 30,000 foot elevation, as you said. You're the contractor. You're the diagnostician. You triage, putting out that fire and point people in the right direction. I think it's great place to be. So congratulations to you for developing that to fit your lifestyle but still giving back so much to our industry. Andre Shirdan, thank you so much, sir, for being here today.

Andre Shirdan: David, it's great to talk to you.

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