

## Ep #239: Alan Stern DDS - Better, Richer, Stronger



### **Full Episode Transcript**

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**Dr. David Phelps**

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

## **Ep #239: Alan Stern DDS - Better, Richer, Stronger**

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David Phelps: Good day everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps of the Freedom Founders Mastermind community and the Dentist Freedom Blueprint podcast. Today, it's going to be really a fun interview, a pleasure for me to have my guest today and that's Dr. Alan G. Stern. Alan, how are you sir?

Alan Stern: Hey David. I'm great, getting better every day, and I'm really glad to be here with you. Thank you so much.

David Phelps: Well, as I said, this can be a pleasure and a lot of fun for me because this is my first chance to really get to know you as a person. I've known about you. You already come with a very strong pedigree in the speaking and coaching arena and dentistry. I know just from what I've read, listening to some of your videos, going to your website, getting what other people say about you, you do have a real passion for the things you've learned in your life and your practice and how you have reconfigured, remolded to serve your greater purpose. I think that's the ultimate that you get to do that. But it doesn't always start out that way, does it?

Alan Stern: No, it doesn't. I just got through reading this fantastic book and I recommend, if you haven't read it, David, and if your listeners haven't read it, Late Bloomers. Oh my goodness.

David Phelps: I'm writing it down right now.

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Alan Stern: Yeah. Let me just break away for one second. Rich Karlgaard. K-A-R-L-G-A-A-R-D.

David Phelps: Perfect.

Alan Stern: Oh my goodness.

David Phelps: Well, let's kind of dig in a little bit bit, and I want people to know a little bit about who you are. Then let's talk about this because I think this is kind of what you and I were talking about just a few minutes ago, is there's always a next. I want people to know, Alan, that you are the founder of a Better, Richer, Stronger LLC, which is a speaking and coaching service for dentists.

Alan Stern: Yes.

David Phelps: You let me know that 25 years into your career and your practice, you had to face the reality that some of your decisions fell short in advancing your career. I want to dig into that because I think again, who doesn't come across decisions we've all made in our lives that didn't quite put us where we want to go? So this is critical. You said you stepped up, you pay the price, you went through a transformation of yourself. Wow. I want to hear about that. Love your practice and your life more than ever. See, that's to me, that's the essence of living a life true to yourself. I know that's what you're about today. You founded Better, Richer, Stronger. You're also an A certified health coach, behavior change specialist. You speak now. You coach now. You're doing a lot of things. You're not old, and I'm not old, but you talked about Late Bloomers. What's a late bloomer, and how'd this all come about for you?

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Alan Stern: Well, how it all came about for me was for most of my career I struggled. I struggled in dental school to get my clinical skills down, and I didn't think very highly of myself because of that. I struggled in my associateship because I could never get myself off the ground. I was convinced that I couldn't make it on my own. Until finally I was pushed to the point to open my practice. Open my practice, dead cold in a saturated area. I'm sitting here in my office now in a building that's hardly visible. David, I didn't believe in advertising. I didn't think that good people advertise. Oh my God, how boneheaded was that? We kind of slogged along and we're doing all right. Bought a larger house despite what my financials told me because hey, I'm a dentist, I deserve a big house.

David Phelps: And you worked hard. You were 27, right?

Alan Stern: Yeah. I worked hard, but my business acumen was not all that great. I made some business decisions that were not all that great. At first I got angry about it and then I realized I own those decisions. That was the tip point where it's nobody's fault. These were my decisions that I made with the best of intent. Yeah, so what? I still made a living, and we all make a living. The tip happened when I had to sell my house because in our fifties, my wife and I were living paycheck to paycheck. That was ridiculous. I had to stop saving. My retirement fund was languishing and I realized with some help of some good counsel, because nobody does it alone, David. You know that. I had some great mentors come into my life and say, "Hey Alan, sell the house. You don't need it anymore." Me live in a town house, are you kidding me? But I did.

After the grieving of my perceived loss of status, perceived loss of status was over, cash flowed. My

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practice jumped because there was no more financial pressure. My goodness, I found my why. We rewrote a mission statement here in the office. As I talked to my colleagues and I've had the good fortune of meeting a lot of really good dentists through my continuing ed and my other dental escapades, I realized that we all face similar problems in a different way. I realized also that both you and I, David and everybody looking at us today, we're all exactly where we should be. "Take a deep breath," I told myself. "Enjoy the ride. You're doing okay." I realized how good my life was.

At that point I just kind of chilled, and I realized that I got a message that we in dentistry, I don't care what kind of practice you're in, are you in a DSO? Are you an a PPO? Are you in charity care? Are you in fee for service? Are you a Pankey type dentist? I don't care what kind of dentistry you're practicing. You have the power to do great stuff every single day and at the same time, stuff's going to happen to you. "My life is a perfect story book," said nobody ever. We have to put the faults and flaws in our imperfect life into perception and understand that we got value and we got stuff to do. There's so much joy in life in our practices and if we come to realize that, if you'll pardon my French, Monday morning doesn't have to suck. Monday morning is okay. I prefer Friday afternoon with David Phelps, but Monday morning is cool.

David Phelps: That's interesting that you say that. I read that in one of your blogs talking about how Monday morning can actually be the fun. I always talked about Monday morning being Monday Morning Syndrome. So the point being, you might have come back from a great CE seminar conference or workshop, something, and many times if you went maybe you didn't take your staff, but

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there's pieces there. You want to go back and you want to invigorate your staff. You have that high. You still have that euphoria. You go into Monday morning. Then I always talk about, "Well, so-and-so's late because he's got a flat tire. Kid's sick. First big patient canceled. A panel's down." All of that inspiration and all that motivation just dissipates away.

A lot of this comes down to leadership and communication and owning your why, taking responsibility for, as you said, Alan, the decisions that you've made in life that either didn't work out or weren't the right ones. Heck, you know like I said, we've all been there. You also obviously have your wife Fran, right?

Alan Stern: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Do you know something here that I know? How do you know my wife?

David Phelps: I read. I do research at. Another piece to get through some of those tougher times in life that we all go through. You've had that support together, you've done this together, which is huge. I think sometimes too, Alan, you talked about the fact that we compare ourselves to other people. Society says, if you don't meet these bars of success or in dentistry, if your work doesn't look like this pristine, like the gurus. So we tend to diminish ourselves, and we don't want to do that in front of our family, our spouse. We hide a lot of stuff, right? We hide it. We keep it inside. Talk about that because I know that's something that we all deal with. You said early on in your career, you felt like you weren't worthy enough, but now that's all changed.

Alan Stern: Yes. Well, I think the nature of our pursuit of dentistry and our pursuit of whatever we see as excellence causes us to go that route. We're very competitive to get into dental

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school. We're always kind of looking over our shoulders to see who's getting better grades than we do because we got to get into school. We get into school, we want to be the best in our class so we could get into the residency or the career that we want. Then we get out into the world. Then in dental school, with all due respect and dental educators are just like us, David, they are people trying to make their way in the world as best they can. But sometimes they send us the message also that they find the imperfections in our work and either they inadvertently say it or we inadvertently hear it, that there's a flaw on our work and it's no good.

There's a flaw in everybody's work. We're recreating nature's or god's, whatever you believe in, work and you can't do it perfectly. You could do it well, and some people do it better than others, but we're making a difference in people's lives. That's what we have to realize. At that tip point, when I realized that my imperfect work, my patients come out, they say thank you. I get hugs and I'm thinking if they like my imperfect work. Wait a minute. Yeah, that's pretty good. So you really have to realize that your imperfect dentistry, perfection is the enemy of good. It's completely the enemy of good. I have the great joy of sitting in a room with Henry Tanner who is the education director at Pankey a number of years ago, and he just had the simple way of expressing excellence is good, but that perfection stuff will kill you.

You come back and you see bite wings on a recall and you see a margin that's not 100%, the world has not come to an end. You may want to correct it. You may want to observe it, but take a deep breath and figure out what it means. Because that crown or that even that stupid class II composite that you've done, that patient is walking with

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it 24/7 and is functioning comfortably with it 24/7. You made a difference. You really got to stay focused on that.

If I may, just steer me if you need to, David, but going back to Late Bloomers, some of us, our brains don't develop physiologically to realize our quest or even to mature enough to understand that we're okay until later in life. It's a physiologic reality. Accept yourself and just don't compare yourself. Look, David, nobody couldn't be as good looking as your eye, right? These people have their burdens they got to live with, right? Nobody could be as perfect a dentist as you or I are, right? But you don't do that. Just be a little bit better tomorrow. That's the kick right there.

You go to a course by Frank Spear, John Coyce, Jeff Rouse, all the great, great mentors that we have and understand that you are not going to be them. Not in one visit. Not in a hundred years. But what I realized is that if I take my own way of working with human beings with my own special attitude, take the clinical stuff that the guys and the gals give us, then I've got my own very special niche practice that I could market for people who are soliciting work, who need work in a way that I give it that you can't. That nobody else can. That's what we're looking for here. Just to be a little better tomorrow, and just know that you are special.

David Phelps: Well, I wish you were one of my professors in dental school because that would've made a big, big difference to hear the positive approach and not demeaning the fact that, as you said, we all have flaws. Our work is never going to be perfect, but boy, we surely feel that pressure coming out of school and you're right. That sets a tone for or the next years. That pressure of never feeling good



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enough, it can literally literally destroy people. It can cause breakups in marriages and families and addictions. It can cause a lot of damage. Can it?

Alan Stern: Yeah. And if I may, again, no disrespect to the dental school instructors out there because they're doing the best they can just like we can, but the dental school mindset has been to this date, very authoritarian. Very my way or the highway. If it ain't perfect, it ain't any good. Many dental school graduates and again, it's not a malicious message that they're carrying. I want everybody to understand that, that there are very few overtly malicious people in this world, and dental school instructors are people who work hard and are doing the best they can. Let's just make that very clear and keep it positive. Keep it up and up.

But if we take that message wrong and we try to practice in authoritarian manner in 2019. Number one,, patients aren't going to accept it. David, you need 12 crowns, six root canals, an implant over here and then a sleep apnea appliance or else. Now go up to the front desk and go see Fran. She'll schedule you and by the way, that'll be \$28,500 and just pay her up front and you're going to tell me to buzz off in four words. "I'll think about it." Because people have understood that our services are 90% elective. People also know that no matter where you are with rare exception, there are a dozen dentists within spitting distance of your office. So we have to understand that the authoritarian model hammer it into them doesn't work anymore.

And teams, we have to treat our teams a little bit differently because we have a shared purpose. We got to get the assistant, the hygienist, the coordinator, whoever

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you have in your office. We got to lovingly kept them in the same frame of mind as we are so that we're all working in unison and carry a message together. When we do that, we have a functional, wonderful team, and by the way, if a team member is not of the same mindset and can't buy into the mission of your office, there's a lot of other offices out there. We can respectfully and lovingly say, "Hey, Janie, I get it. You're not buying into this. It's cool, but this may not be the right environment for you. Let's work on a transition." Instead of saying, "You're fired. Get out." You don't have to do it that way for heaven's sake.

I've also heard that even today, there are docs who throw instruments at their assistants. Why? What good will come of it? You're here. You're a dentist. You're a healer. You're a fixer. You got to think of what good will come of what comes out of your mouth and also what you do. Throw an instrument at somebody? What's going to happen? Bring somebody into your office and talk to them about what's going right and what's going wrong. Maybe something good will come up.

David Phelps: I want to go back to, you talked about when you were in your 50s you sold our house, moved to a town home, reduced your overhead, your lifestyle expenses, and that kind of starts to shift everything. Because you talked about some of the pressure came off. Now give us some of that feeling. Obviously you've worked very hard to become the best clinician you can. You've gone to Pankey and a lot of the training to do that. At some point, that wasn't enough. What changed? What changed in your mind? You talked about getting help, not being so prideful to say, "Hey, I need help in some areas of my life that decisions I've made just haven't worked out." That

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seemed to really change things rapidly for you. Is that how it happened?

Alan Stern: Yeah. What happened, I found a very good financial counselor after I'd languished for a while and it was from a friend who recommended this person. What happened? Number one, we forced ourselves to start saving again. Number two, when we sold the house, we eliminated money as a limiting variable in our life. I didn't have to internally pray to God that Mrs. Jones was going to accept the implant case. I could go in, I could relax, I could show Mrs. Jones what's going on. We can sit and discuss what she wanted, and I could actually sit and listen to what she wanted rather than what I wished she would get. So I eliminated ... Look, we all have to earn money and we all have a certain cost of living, which we have to maintain and hopefully exceed. But when we lower our ceiling, when we earn here and live here and invest the rest, life gets a heck of a lot better. Than when we live here, earn here and pray for this gap to fill.

I think one important thing we need to know is you teach dream big and you're a great, great model of dreaming big and attaining big. Dream big, but live in reality while you're dreaming big. Build it up. Don't set your financial red line here while you're earning here. Because even if it does work, you're going to lose a lot of stomach lining along the way and you're not going to practice happily. Practicing happily and giving generously is key, and eliminating money is the limiting variable. That is the thing, that tip point in our fifties, that crisis, that horrible feeling in your gut or wiping your brow when, "Oh my God, I cleared my last bill on the 30th of the month. Now I got to worry about the next month." That's gone. It's a cool thing.

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David Phelps: That has to change you obviously internally. So was that a point also where you and Fran and whoever else you were working with, you were able to start to build that vision and gain buy in from your key staff? Did you have to change some people out? You obviously became even a stronger leader because the stress was being removed so you could actually be more transparent, more genuine with your patients. I assume the same thing with your staff. Did that all start to come together also at the same time? Did you have to shift some people around in the practice or let some people go that weren't a good fit?

Alan Stern: Well, all during my career, I have let people go who weren't a good fit because I wasn't hiring properly. Going back a couple of decades, I came back from Pankey C1 and I talk about the difference between a non Pankey practice and a Pankey practice, like the difference between a convenience store to boutique. I had one team member say, "Well, I don't shop at boutiques." Well, this may not be the right future for you. But when we hit rock bottom a number of years ago when things were really problematic, we had to let a team member go and we had to work short-staffed. Fran and me and Jessica, our fabulous hygienist, because everything was slow. We scrambled, and we got it. We built it back. Three of us doing the work of four people. Four plus people. What problem did, we took a ... Some politician said it. I don't remember. It takes a crisis to get things going.

Well, the crisis caused me to open up even further to Jessica, our hygienist, and we had hired correctly. We used emotional intelligence to screen the people who come in. Jess, I'll rave about her as much as I rave about my fantastic wife at the front desk, but Jess has behaved like a daughter to us. We opened up transparently about

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what was going on and she, along with we, rolled up our sleeves. We did what we had to do. We kept the practice going. We started marketing a little bit better, just more word of mouth, a little bit more outside advertising through online. It started clicking. Then we reached that point again where we grew enough and we added another team member.

I'm a small practice. That's just who I am. Some people have a different vision of it and that's who they are. You make that work. But we're making it work right now with two fantastic hardworking young people and two fantastic hardworking, younger people and we're all together. We wrote our mission statement together. We actually had two team meetings where we got everybody even more on the same page by creating our vision of what we want to do for people and then dumbing that down into a four sentence mission statement. Works.

David Phelps: That's what gives everybody on the team the empowerment to take ownership because they can make decisions without having to run everything through you or through a friend because everybody understands what the vision, what the values are in practice.

Alan Stern: Exactly.

David Phelps: Right. It takes that pressure off.

Alan Stern: Exactly.

David Phelps: Even when the doctor or the owner's not financially pressured because even if you don't express that to staff, they can feel it. Patients feel it. Right. The whole dynamic of a practice changes. Now, how did Bigger, Richer, Stronger evolve? Obviously your passion exudes from

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you. You went through a transformation. You took a road that the majority of us traveled and then something changes, a rock bottom, a crisis, something. Instead of going to a hole or a cave or playing the victim, we rise up and say, "Look, there's things I don't know. There's things I can do better." You're not doing that for other people. Tell us about that. How does Bigger, Richer, Stronger, your speaking, your coaching now work within your life and Fran's life and your practice?

Alan Stern: David, Better, Richer, Stronger is a calling from my heart. I'm going to have a tough time with this. I did a talk a couple of weeks ago where I spoke of my upbringing. I'm the son of a Holocaust survivor. My mother, through her terrible experience, kind of modeled me to understand that Jewish people were put in this world to suffer and that the best day is an exercise in futility. Subliminally that's how I was modeled. I carried this baggage for most of my adult life. Having spoken to so many dentists and so many patients and so many people, I understand that every one of us has stuff inside us. What I realized in retrospect is that I was able to somehow overcome that stuff and enjoy my life. My life's not perfect. Neither is yours. Neither is anybody's. But we can't allow that to define us. We got to allow it to challenge us.

Having overcome what I did, having paid the price in terms of my perceived status, perceived is very important. Having learned that life can be transformed at any age, at any financial or clinical or any level sometimes or more often than not, not without help. I understand that I've learned so much. The suffering that my mother went through will bring some good in the world through the message that I want to bring to get us and hope maybe even to the community at large. Because on a downside,

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David, and I don't like to dwell on the downside, but we know that dentists are number two behind police officers and soldiers at risk for depression and suicide. I'm so grateful that I never hit that clinical depression point, but I do know dentists who have been so desperate and suffered so much pain that the only way they saw their way through their payments was to take their own lives, and dammit, I'm going to save a life.

But we're also going to make lives better and having been through what I've been through and living just fine now, thank you very much. I've learned to eat right. I've learned to work out well. I've learned to hit my pillow every night and think of three things I'm grateful for. I've learned to walk into my office every day, and I don't care what my schedule looks like, if it's a pile of little things or one big thing or maybe I'm getting a problem person coming in. We get a few of those. I think to myself, whose life am I going to make better today? It could be my assistant. It could be my hygienist. It could be the dog-gone mailman just by giving them a bottle of water. We have that power doctor each and every day to do something good no matter what's happening to us. We got to know that.

David Phelps: Yeah, and I would truly say that your pain, the pain that your mother went through and passed some of that onto you, that your pain is your power and you're using that power now and helping change and transform other people's lives. That's the ultimate. The ultimate in dentistry is certainly serving well. But gosh, you've got a message that you're getting out that's tremendous.

Alan Stern: Think about this, David, any doc who's been through any adversity and looks back on it and says, "You made it. You made it, and you're going to make it again." I hear



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stories of dentists who were delivered legal papers, and there's no worse feeling in the pit of your stomach than if that happens. But you know what? You're going to live to talk about it. Patient walks out of your office in a tizzy. You're going to live to talk about it because dozens of others are walking in saying, "Hey doc, help me." When we learn to live in gratitude, when we eat healthy, when we exercise and make sure that we are up to the challenge and when we get money as a limiting variable out of our lives and when we create systems in our office to live around that happiness, things get better. Things are good.

David Phelps: Alan, what's one thing that you would tell a dentist to do if he or she hasn't done it already?

Alan Stern: That I haven't said already? Well, we live in an era of inflation, David, so I'm going to go a couple of them. What I said before, get money as a limiting variable out of your life. Live in reality, and love yourself because of it. Here's the one thing, David. Get a good relationship with yourself. Accept yourself. Love yourself. Understand that you're doing good and each and every day, and respect it. Look at the good you're doing. Love yourself and then you can have a great relationship with your team, the people you serve, your community. Be a force for goodness each and every day. Don't chase the money, give generously and the money will follow you. That's huge.

David Phelps: Well Alan, those are words certainly live by. This has been really, really a great conversation to have today and thank you so much for sharing from your heart. That's not the easiest thing to do, but we know that when we can share with full transparency, the hurts, the pains, the struggles that we've gone through, that that's how we can



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help other people. If we can't go there, then everything else is just superficial. You certainly have dug down deep today. People can reach you BetterRicherStronger.com, BetterRicherStronger@gmail.com, and your phone number. I've got it here. Do you want me to give it out, or you would like to-

Alan Stern: Just call the office (732) 493-8030. You can speak to Fran. The first time you speak to her, you're not going to hear the real truth about me, but if you call a couple of times she'll tell you how ridiculous it is to live with me. But she's been my partner in growth. She knows me. Obviously. We'll be married 42 years next month. She even got five good years out of that deal. She has nothing to be upset about. She'll welcome you with open arms, and we'll find a time. Anybody who wants to spend the half hour with me or even an hour on the phone, I'll do that for you. I'll listen to you, and maybe I could tweak your perspective a little bit. The worst thing that could happen is you'll get to know me. Ask Fran, she'll tell you. The best thing that could happen is maybe I could change your perspective on something that's bugging you. That would make me very happy. If you feel that you want this, you deserve it. Come over and get it.

David Phelps: You're a great inspiration. Dr. Alan Stern, thank you so much for taking time today, again, to speak from your heart and talk about what drives you but also talk about the fact that there was a turning point and how you went through it. Very, very, very solid words of wisdom today. So we thank you.

Alan Stern: David, I'm so grateful. Thank you.

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