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[Empowering Employees to Success – Part 3](#)

Audio interview with Steve Bilt, president and CEO Bright Now! Dental

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Start

Nancy Ellen Dodd: In 2003 you received the Entrepreneur of the Year award. Some of the other recipients of this award, putting it in context, have been Michael Dell of Dell Computers, Richard Schultze of Best Buy, and Jack & Andy Taylor of Enterprise Rent-A-Car. It is said that the award was in recognition, not only of right now emerging as the largest and most profitable company in the dental practice management industry, but also for your strategies of empowering field operations management, developing administrative excellence, focusing resources on patient care and satisfaction, and providing incentives and recognition to all employees. I'd like to talk about each of these areas as it relates to Bright Now! but also how other industries can incorporate these ideas into what they're doing. First of all, can you define who the Bright Now! field operations management are and why you believe it is important to empower them and how did you accomplish that?



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Steve Bilt: When I think of the field operations team what I refer to generally is the office manager, and each office is going to have someone in charge, the office manager and then the people they report up to. So, we'll have a district management model that's going to have maybe a one-per-seven to ten offices ratio and then they'll report up into a larger market operations role which will have a single market head which reports up into an area for us. So, that's the teams I'm really talking about and the best way to accomplish empowering them is, well, there's a few ways, and I think a big part of it is helping them understand what's expected. So, what are the things that we, as a company, consider to be the "non-negotiables", things that we have to do consistently across the board to be successful? And when we say "successful" it means that if you have, in our case, 300 offices and they all go do things their own way, each one of those may be great but there's zero leverage in the organization by doing that. So, what are the things that we have to do very consistently if that's the way we select a site, if that's the way the facility is laid out, if that's the information technology systems that are in there, you go up and down the list, the marketing materials, all those things. Marketing is a great example, if you don't do it the same you can't get leverage so you'll just incur the cost of 300 times whatever one guy would get, versus the leverage you can get from being a large organization. So, a lot of what empowering is, ironically, is setting the appropriate boundaries so people understand what it is they make decisions with regard to, and where it is we need them to pick it off the shelf and use what's there. So, by setting that up and by being real clear about communicating that I think people then understand that "This is an area where I have to make a decision." And so, we've done that and said, "You guys really are the best qualified, 'cause you're the closest to the customer. You're the best qualified to make all these decisions." And then said, "Go do it," and probably most importantly was a philosophy that says, and I alluded to it earlier: the best operators in the world are going to make some number-- call it 75 percent of the decisions correctly. They're also going to make dozens or hundreds of decisions a day which means they're going to be wrong a lot. And if you're wrong, call it out, run it up the flagpole, embrace it, and move on. Don't hide it, don't wallow in it, just fix it and move on. And so it's a culture of accepting the fact if you're going to empower somebody to make decisions, no matter how good they are, they're going to be wrong not just every now and then but a lot and then saying, "Fix it. If you can't fix it, elevate it and we'll help you fix it." So, I think that's really, again, those two things are probably the key to truly empowering people.

Nancy Ellen Dodd: I think that's true and it's very well put. Tell me, what does administrative excellence mean to you and how do you develop it?

Steve Bilt: The term administrative excellence-- we're referring to all the things that aren't the delivery of care, so care is the non-administrative part. Everything else really becomes administrative and so in those areas the question becomes: are you doing them uniformly? Are you doing them cost-effectively? Are you doing them in a way that makes the organization and ultimately the delivery of care more effective? So that could be using one form to put on a patient chart rather than five forms. That could be having a form that's electronic rather than filled out in triplicate at a cost of 75 cents per patient visit.

When you start having two-and-a-half million patient visits a year, 75 cents really matters. So, administrative excellence is constantly looking at the things that aren't care-related and saying "What's the most efficient way, in terms of facilitating the delivery of care, and cost-effectiveness to handle the administrative side of the business." And again, it's really just trying to streamline it. That's first and foremost because the most valuable thing we have is the time that our people have to offer to the patients. And so when administrative things take them away from the customer-facing activity, that's bad. If we can do things to automate and put them in a position where they have more time available for the patients, all the better. And so really that's all we mean by administrative excellence.

Nancy Ellen Dodd: Well that's a good definition. In your industry customer service must be a major challenge. How does your company approach customer service? In what way do you focus resources on patient care and satisfaction? As I said earlier, one 'phone call turned me off because, it wasn't that the receptionist was rude as much as the attitude that was conveyed.

Steve Bilt: We try and keep things as simple as possible in terms of customer service. I'm not a huge believer in long, drawn-out, three week customer service training programs; big customer service training manuals; those kinds of things. And I say that because most people know how to treat someone with respect when they want to. So if the President of the United States walks into the dental office, he's probably going to be treated with a whole lot of respect. We're not going to need customer service training to make sure he's treated well. So, what we try to do is go with some simplifying principles. We have an initiative we call G3 and that's our guiding customer service principle and that's *Greeting; Guiding; Gratitude*. So what that means is if someone walks through the front door of the office, or calls us on the 'phone, we expect them to get a great greeting. What's a great greeting? A great greeting involves eye contact and a smile; pretty straightforward. People know how to do that. We have to make sure we encourage it and celebrate it when it happens otherwise people won't be encouraged to do it, so that's one. Guiding is us taking people through every step of the process and it comes from an initiative we call Power to the Patient. What I learned in healthcare over a long period of time, it's actually a story that relates to my daughter that kicked this one off, was the notion that if you don't feel in control of the situation all you want to do is try to escape it. And so, in dentistry if people don't feel like they have some level of control they say, "Give me the least I need and get me out of here," and that's not the best thing for them long-term and it doesn't building enduring dentistry. So, what we talk about around guiding is explaining to patients at every step of the process what you're going to do, why you're going to do it, and how long it's going to take. When they know what, why and how long, power is transferred back to the patient. They feel better, we feel better, and ultimately the outcome's better. And then finally gratitude and that is the most self-explanatory of them all, which is really looking someone in the eye again, sort of the other book end, and saying "Thank you," and really meaning it. Because people have entrusted you with their care, they've taken a lot of time out of their day and you really owe them a thank you. So, G3: Greeting; Guiding; and Gratitude.



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Nancy Ellen Dodd: We've talked about customers. What about the employees? What was your line of reasoning for and how did you put into practice meaningful employee incentives and recognition?

Steve Bilt: Well, our overall guiding three-word principle is *Smiles for Everyone* and that's pervasive throughout our company. And so that means we want to see patients smiling, we want to see doctors smiling, we want to see employees smiling. We want the company to smile because the results are good; we want our investors to be able to smile. So, that's really the reason to try to say "Let's treat everyone fairly, including employees." Incentives really are just trying to say to the employees that "As you create value you deserve to share in that value." And we want to align ourselves with all of those constituents in a win-win fashion. And the best way to do that is to, obviously, align your goal set and then be willing to share that. That said, incentives, if they're just financial, sends a message as well. And that message is probably fairly obvious which is that the money matters more than anything and that's not really what we're all about. So, we rigorously measure customer satisfaction every month. For the whole ten years of the company we've sent out thousands upon thousands of customer satisfaction surveys, we survey the employee base, we survey the doctor base, and so we really do want to understand what they value and what they appreciate. And at the end of the day a lot of that is communication, a lot of that is an opportunity to grow and be heard, and recognition. And so we work pretty regularly to try to expand on those recognition programs. I would say we're probably only getting a C grade on that right now but it's something we're focused on and I have every intention of seeing that become a B and then ultimately an A in terms of what we do. We're getting much better on communication of the base, which is important, but we still have some work to do on developing our incentive programs around recognition, not necessarily monitoring. Monitoring I think we do a pretty good job of but that's really not the most important thing. To be left an equalizer, and people need it, they all have bills to pay, and they know that's the one way to keep score, but at the end of the day it's still more about that recognition, that satisfaction, connecting people to what we do which is take care of other people, which is why they got into healthcare to begin with.

Nancy Ellen Dodd: I like it that you've compared finance to that becoming the only motivator. Going back to the 2003 Entrepreneur of the Year award, you've also been a judge for the Entrepreneur of the Year and what criteria do you use when you judge successful entrepreneurs?

Steve Bilt: I think there's a number of criterion. The amount of risks someone takes to do something is certainly one measure; the longevity of the concept, it's not terribly interesting if somebody's had a one or two year run. It's great for them but it doesn't necessarily mean they've extended the concept to change other people's lives in a meaningful way. I think, to that end, impact on communities is important in terms of what they've done to not only grow the company for themselves but for their employee base and hopefully for the broader community around them. And then profitability because even in healthcare no



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money - no mission, as they say. You have to have a concept that generates enough capital to support itself. I would also say that it's not just because there's no money - no mission but because that a concept that truly adds value in the marketplace, which is really what we're looking for, a concept that truly adds value in the marketplace should and must be able to extract a reasonable return. It just doesn't really make sense that you're adding value yet you can't get enough economic to be profitable. So, even though some might say, "Well, profitability sounds kind of crass," the reality is if you're really adding a lot of value then the economic equation should be there. And so I think those things and again, over time, people can find seams in the economy where they can exploit those and make money for a short period of time and there's nothing wrong with that but that's not necessarily what enduring entrepreneurial enterprises are about to me. And so, our economy is good at closing those gaps too but if you're truly adding value there's no gap to close.

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