Most of you taking the time to read this will recognize that we are all managers (either “autocratic” or “democratic”) in the various capacities of our lives. The style of management that you employ may even be different depending on the situation. You may act differently when you are managing your home, your practice, the team you coach, or another organization that you run. I am guessing that each and every one of us perceives ourselves to be good managers in each of these situations. And yet, we have seen that things don’t always progress as smoothly as we would like and that we need to make adjustments from time to time. I am certainly no exception.

As dentists and orthodontists, most of us have been overachievers for most of our lives. That is how we got to where we are. And, sometimes, we let that go to our heads. If you are like I am, when you get an idea, a problem, or a goal in your head, your mind doesn’t rest until you can figure out how to fully grasp that idea, solve that problem, or achieve that goal. Persistence and determination can be valuable traits, but they can be debilitating as well. One of the hardest things for me to learn has been that I can’t (or shouldn’t) do everything by myself.

I learned a valuable lesson from an experience I had involving our resident practice at the school clinic a few years ago. To make a long story short, there were a couple of unexplainable incidents involving missing supplies, poor organization, and behind the back gossip that seems to be common in many office situations. I tried to handle the situation myself and I ended up blowing things out of proportion by overthinking them, and thereby I made matters worse; a classic case of overreaction on my part. When the school administration got involved, they suggested I hire a new practice manager to take control. We wrote up a list of responsibilities and hired a young and energetic person to take on this job.

The new practice manager was eager to accomplish the tasks before her and quickly assumed responsibility for performing all of them herself. She ordered the supplies, took care of the equipment repairs, wrote a new clinic manual, organized the schedule, and even took on an ambitious marketing campaign for our practice. What the rest of the staff saw was someone who worked in an office while they took care of all the patients. The assistants learned quickly that this new practice manager would cover for them when they were out, and take x-rays for them when they were busy. The assistants in our practice had lost their sense of empowerment because they were left out of the process. The orthodontic residents were learning a poor management style and I’m sure the patients themselves could also feel the underlying tension in the practice.

BusinessDictionary.com defines Empowerment as: “A management practice of sharing information, rewards, and power with employees so that they can take initiative and make decisions to solve problems and improve service and performance. Empowerment is based on the idea that giving employees skills, resources, authority, opportunity, motivation, as well as holding them responsible and accountable for outcomes of their actions, will contribute to their competence and satisfaction.” What an enlightening concept!

When the practice manager left to explore other opportunities, we chose not to fill the open position. Instead, we divided the responsibilities and created an interwoven system where each staff member depends on input from other members to get their own jobs done. For example, one is responsible for keeping inventory but another is responsible for ordering supplies. Everyone is intimately involved and they need to work together. Every week, we meet for an hour or so to discuss how each aspect of the practice is doing and what we can do to make it better. After about two months, the initial shock behind the change wore off and everything started humming harmoniously. Everyone is busier now but they work more efficiently and are more satisfied overall. The positive difference is clearly evident and even our financial situation has improved dramatically. Most important to me is that we now have a happier workplace for the employees (including myself!), a more energetic environment for our patients, and a better learning experience for our orthodontic residents.

I am not naive enough to believe that this seemingly utopian model is ideal for every situation or that it will continue to function forever without adjustment. Indeed, it might even work better under the supervision of a democratically-minded, full-time practice manager. The key ingredients are always having the right people in the right positions. However, I do believe that a management style incorporating empowerment is essential to the well-being of any working environment. For me, the challenge is to be able to continue to provide this for the employees in my department and the residents in my academic program while resisting the ever-present temptation to do everything myself, and also while working under control of the larger institution that employs me.