

# Mentoring the Next Generation of Leaders in Dental Hygiene



Amy E. Coplen,  
RDH, EPDH, MS

The longer I have been in the field of dental hygiene, the more I realize that the profession provides endless opportunities. Beyond traditional clinical practice roles, dental hygienists can seek opportunities in public health settings, education, advocacy, industry, and potentially becoming a midlevel provider. Yet, many choose a career in dental hygiene with the ultimate goal of becoming a practicing clinician. I know that was my intention over twenty years ago when entering dental hygiene school. Although this begs the question; how can we mentor the next generation of leaders from within our profession, and how can we get dental hygienists to envision themselves in roles beyond the cubicle? A recent study on the employment patterns of dental hygienists revealed an estimated 8% reduction in the dental hygiene workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> making mentorship for the future more important than ever.

Born between 1995–2012, the newest generation entering the workforce have been labeled “Generation Z” and their oldest members are now 26 years old.<sup>2</sup> Just like every generation before them, they have been greatly influenced by historical events that have taken place during their lifetime. Significant events for Generation Z are the 9/11 attacks and now a global pandemic. They were also raised by Generation X parents who endured the economic hardships of the great recession. As a result, this generation has developed determination, grit, and sense of responsibility as well as a realistic outlook on life inherited from their Generation X parents. This generation is committed to those around them and motivated to make a difference. Not only do they want to change the world, but they have the work ethic to actually get it done.

Naturally, Generation Z individuals are fearful of their economic futures.<sup>2</sup> Generation Z wants to pursue

education that will be useful and relevant in getting a job after graduation.<sup>3</sup> However, they also want their work to be meaningful. These qualities make this generation particularly well suited for the dental hygiene profession because it is the perfect combination of a stable and successful career where there are numerous opportunities to make a difference. Generation Z believes in equality and they have a great deal of passion for social justice.<sup>3</sup> We must seize the opportunity to mentor a generation with a strong work ethic and a commitment to doing good in society. I can’t think of a better profile for a future leader in dental hygiene.

One of the most important things a mentor can do is tell you the truth. This can be incredibly humbling as most of us yearn to hear the words “well done” from our mentors, but for this generation to reach their full potential, it is vital that we tell them how they can improve and grow. The good news is that Generation Z is highly driven to succeed, and they can handle the truth. For myself, as a member of Generation X and a woman, I have always been eager to be seen as a hard worker, someone who puts in the effort for the sake of being a team player, without a personal agenda, or expectation of receiving something in return. However, somewhere in my mid-career, a mentor told me something that had a deep impact. She said, “Don’t ever apologize for being ambitious.” Her words had a lasting impact for me and my career trajectory as a dental hygiene educator and program director. Members of Generation Z are already ambitious and might not need to hear that type of message to move forward outside of their comfort zones. Rather, all they may need is to be connected to the right cause that fits their passions. Isn’t that what a good mentor does? They take time to get to know their mentees as individuals, build a trusted and authentic

relationship, and then connect them with opportunities that help them grow and reach their full potential.

Finally, another important characteristic of Generation Z is that they are the most diverse generation in history and the last generation who will be primarily white.<sup>4</sup> They have no patience for inequality based on gender, race, or sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup> Over the past several years, I noticed that I was migrating toward mentoring students and faculty who reminded me of myself, either as a student or a young faculty member. Although this is a natural tendency and has been known to happen across professions, we also know now that heterogeneous teams consistently outperform homogeneous teams. Now, more than ever before, we need new leaders in dental hygiene that reflect the diversity of the population at large. By mentoring mini versions of ourselves, we prevent progress within our discipline.

Wouldn't you want to mentor someone who will far surpasses you professionally? I have recently shifted my mentality to intentionally seek out mentees who look and think differently than I do. I have found no greater satisfaction than watching someone I have mentored succeed in discovering their potential. If the future dental hygiene profession lies in the hands of Generation Z, I believe that future will be exceedingly bright.

I would like to extend special thanks to some important mentors in my life. You inspired me to grow and envision my potential.

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*Amy E. Coplen, RDH, EPDH, MS* is a professor and the Director, School of Dental Hygiene Studies, Pacific University, Forest Grove, OR, USA.

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