

Whatever you thought of his politics, Ronald Reagan was a true leader. People followed him because he knew where he was going.

He restored hope and reminded us what it means to be American. "You can go and live in Turkey," he said, "but you can't become a Turk. You can go and live in Japan, but you cannot become Japanese . . . but anyone from any corner of the world can come to America and become an American."

Reagan leaves a legacy of leadership that we all could learn from. We don't have to save more than 70 lives, as he did as a teenage life-guard. We don't have to rescue a nation's spirit, as he did when Americans were held hostage in Iran and suffering the worst economy since the Great Depression at home.

What we can do is internalize the qualities that made people want to follow him, so we can serve our patients, our staff and our families to the best we can provide.

Speak in plain English

Even Reagan's critics called him the Great Communicator. He spoke plainly. He never used two syllables when one would do. He articulated what millions felt. In 1980 he boiled the issues down to one question: "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?"

He knew how to get what we call case-acceptance. He made eye contact. Addressing 10,000 people, he made you feel he was talking to you. He told stories, a tool dentists could put to much better use. Too often, we assume that clinical education and before-and-after photos are enough to convince patients to do what's best for their oral health and esthetics. But it's the stories that matter: "Here's a patient, Mrs. Smith, who's just like you. Here's what we did for her. She's thrilled." Listen to the stories your patients are telling; and learn to tell them the story of excellent oral health.

Don't be defensive

Reagan loved to be underestimated. "It's true," he once said, "hard work never killed anybody; but I figure, why take the chance?" If you are defensive about your fees or anything else about your practice, you're in a vulnerable position. If a patient complains that a fee is too high, you should be able to confidently respond: "Yes, our fee is higher than other dentists, and here's why." Be proud of your services, your team and your fees, and patients will be receptive to your message.

Be prepared

After a poor showing in his first debate with Walter Mondale in 1984 when Mondale made age an issue, Reagan made sure he would't be caught off guard again.

The age question arose at the second debate, and he was prepared: "I will not exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience," he said. Years later, Mondale acknowledged he knew at that moment he had lost.

Are you and your team prepared for the predictable questions patients throw our way day in and day out? Do you have written training resources for new and seasoned staff members to turn to?

Are you prepared for questions like, "Why do I need to come in for cleanings so often?"; "Do you accept my insurance?"; "Why are your fees so high?"; "I'm in pain—how can you talk to me about money?"; "My insurance has changed. Can you recommend a dentist on my company's list?"

The answers you give to predictable questions like these can make or break your hygiene schedule and indeed,

*Whether or not you agreed
with his politics, you can learn
a lot from his leadership*

Lessons from the life of

BY PATRICK WAHL, D.M.D., M.B.A.

Ronald

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your entire practice. One wrong word may turn away callers who would be your patients. Most of us aren't great at "winging it." Having a few key words and phrases at the ready can instill understanding in staff members and confidence in patients.

Wear a velvet glove

Common courtesy was so ingrained in this man that even in the grips of Alzheimer's, when he had essentially stopped speaking,

he was known to defer to the nurses treating him. Are we unfailingly gracious to our employees, co-workers and patients?

Most of us assume we say the right things. But too often, we take each other for granted. Even a simple "thank you" seems too difficult some days.

And under your velvet glove...

Have an iron fist

Reagan's first real leadership test was the 1981 air traffic controllers' strike. Despite complex issues, Reagan saw the issue simply: Air traffic controllers took an oath not to strike. They were breaking that oath. Period.

He upheld the law in the face of threats and intimidation. He didn't fire anyone; but he gave the controllers an ultimatum: show up for your job or your job will be gone. Are our expectations that clear? Is our ability to follow through that consistent? These are the attributes of a great manager

Don't criticize your colleagues

Reagan admonished his fellow GOP members of an 11th Commandment: Thou shalt not speak ill of another Republican.

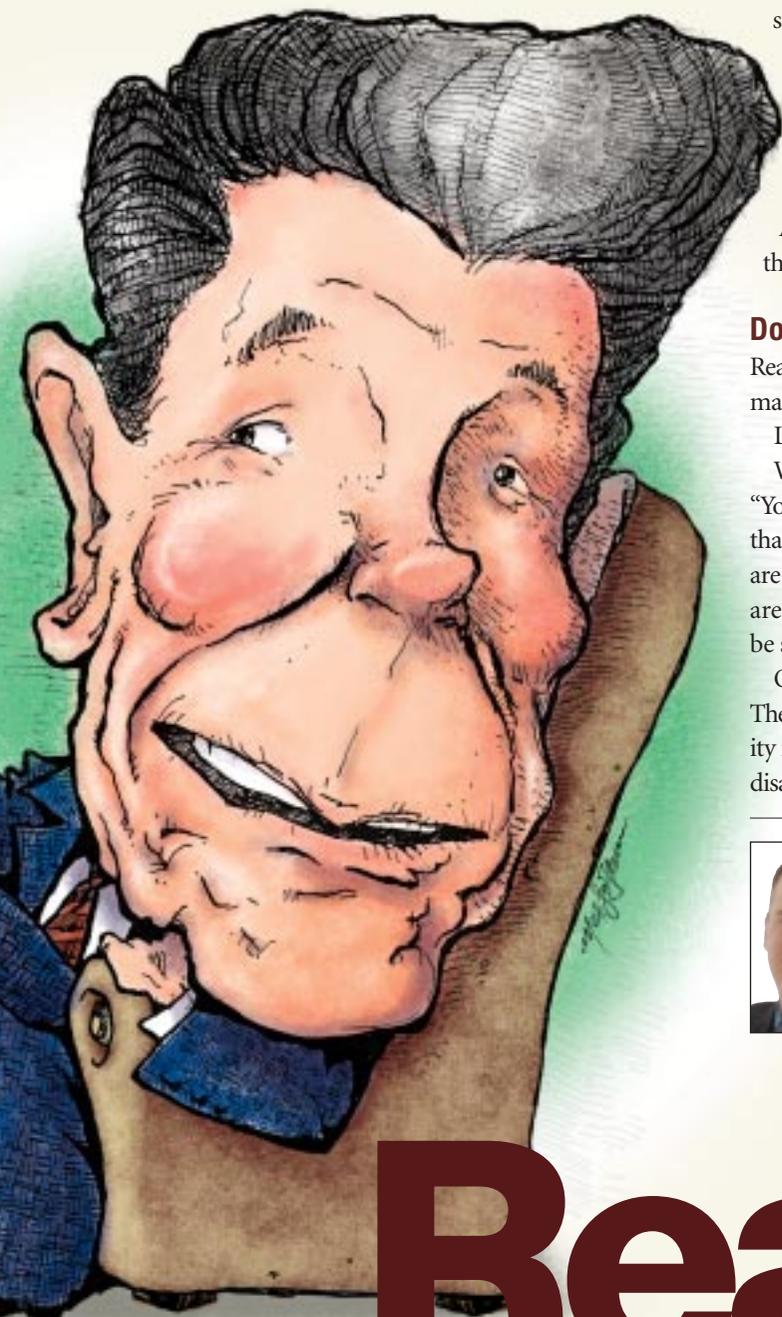
Let us not speak ill of our fellow dentists.

When you criticize other dentists, you're telling patients, "You're stupid; you went to a bad dentist." You're telling patients that dentists can't be trusted. As in every other profession, there are a few dentists who can't be trusted, but all the ones I've met are caring and committed, and that's the message we should be sending.

Our patients and our staff look to us for assurance every day. They believe what we say when they know we believe it. That quality is the main reason so many admired Reagan even when they disagreed with him. He would have made a great dentist. □



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Reagan