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HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE SURGEONS

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that help these surgeons achieve
professional and personal fulfillment.

By Rochelle Nataloni, Contributing Editor

Editorial Advisors:

Matthew Jensen, MBA
Sioux Falls, South Dakota

James D. Dawes
Sarasota, Florida

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Premium Practice Today is a monthly feature section in **CRST** providing articles and resources to assist surgeons and their staff in the pursuit of premium practice development to facilitate exceptional experiences for patients and business success.

Habits of Highly Effective Surgeons

Work-home balance tops the list of habits that help these surgeons achieve professional and personal fulfillment.

BY ROCHELLE NATALONI, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

For goodness' sake: this phrase describes the simple reason why many of us went into health care.

Whether we are doctors who see patients every single day or administrators who study the business of health care, more often than not, helping patients with their visual needs drove us into this field. Yet, how busy our daily lives have become, thanks to declining reimbursement, electronic health records' adoption, ICD-10, the Affordable Care Act, staffing issues, growth constraints, 24-hour access to doctors through e-mail and smartphones, all while we provide the best clinical and surgery outcomes available. For goodness' sake!

When we rest, how we wake up, when we check our e-mails, and how the little blue light from our screens shines on us as we are falling asleep, all affect whether we feel an internal rhythm about what we do professionally, physically, and spiritually. This month's *Premium Practice Today* focuses on how the habits of some of the industry's most productive doctors help them to achieve the best for their patients, teams, and families.

—Matthew Jensen, MBA, editorial advisor

In the well-known book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen R. Covey explores “the path of living with fairness, integrity, service, and human dignity.”¹ He describes those goals as “principles that provide the security to adapt to change and the wisdom and power to take advantage of the opportunities that change creates.” With a tip of the hat to Mr. Covey (📍 www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits.php), this article explores several habits of some highly effective surgeons. It addresses the topic from three angles: personal habits, clinical habits, and practice management habits. Interestingly, although all of the surgeons interviewed stress the importance of separating their personal and professional lives, invariably, it is the same set of habits/behaviors manifested in each sector that helps them live lives that they describe as personally and professionally fulfilling.

The surgeons who commented have distinctly different practices. One is an academician from a leading teaching institution, another has a thriving LASIK practice, a third is heavily involved in organizations that help promote safe and effective eye surgery in developing countries, and the others have booming refractive cataract practices. Sacrosanct family time, work-home balance, exercise, and goal setting are among the habits that help these surgeons achieve satisfaction and success as people and professionals.

WILLIAM W. CULBERTSON, MD: THERE IS LIFE OUTSIDE THE OR

William W. Culbertson, MD, of the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami (📍 <http://bascompalmer.org/doctors/profile/1005>) says having hobbies that he enjoys with his family helps him put into perspective

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"They play tennis competitively, and I also play tennis, and I travel with them when they participate in junior tennis tournaments."

—Dr. Culbertson

the stress associated with treating a growing contingent of patients who are referred to him with complications from previous surgeries. "These diversions mostly involve time spent with my children," explains Dr. Culbertson. "They play tennis competitively, and I also play tennis, and I travel with them when they participate in junior tennis tournaments." Family fun time is also spent boating, but not nearly as much time is spent on the water as is spent on the court. "Regardless of what we're doing together, the point is that it enables me to bond with my children and take a step back from ophthalmology and see the big picture that exists beyond the [OR]."

Dr. Culbertson also carves out time to explore interesting cultural venues when he travels to ophthalmology meetings. For instance, when he was recently in Japan for the 2014 World Ophthalmology Congress (📍 www.woc2014.org), he took a few half days to reacquaint himself with some of the sights that he had seen years before and to take a day trip to Kyoto. "I always try to combine personal travel with work travel, which is one way that I achieve a

sense of balance between work and my personal life," he says.

Dr. Culbertson says no matter how tight his schedule is, he makes time for fun and family by prioritizing. "You have to learn to say no to things that are going to compromise that," he stresses. "This comes with age and experience. You have to be committed to organizing your day such that you can walk out of the office so that you can get home at a certain time."

Of course, this is often easier said than done—especially when work is something you actually enjoy. "The work that I do in ophthalmology is so exciting that there is a tendency to get enveloped and saturated in it, but when I see this happening to my peers, I think that, in the long run, it will not be as fulfilling as it seems," Dr. Culbertson remarks. "It's important to learn when to say, 'yes,' and how to say, 'no,' and [to] make a long-term bucket list of things that you want to do. Otherwise, work can consume your life."

He adds, "There are so many distractions from people who want your time, your opinion, your services, and you can't do everything. Early in my career, I tried to do everything. I tried to be a cornea specialist and a cataract specialist and a refractive specialist and a uveitis specialist and a retina specialist, because things would divert me in those directions. Then, I realized that I had to narrow my focus; otherwise, I would be scattered and less effective in every facet of life."

Being organized is another habit that Dr. Culbertson says enhances his efficacy in all sectors of his life. "I've gone from being a very disorganized person to a very organized person," he says. "It goes against my personality to be ultraorganized, but I've learned that it's much better to handle things up-front rather than having to deal with the fallout that happens when you wait until the last minute. It's a great time saver and stress reducer."

Another key element that Dr. Culbertson feels contributes to his career-life balance is the understanding that he is professionally expendable. "If you don't accept that, you can let your practice take you

over,” he explains. “If I died tomorrow, the patients would say, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry. When is the next doctor who can see me available?’ You have to accept that you’re not indispensable. As physicians, we are caregivers, so we tend to feel guilty when we say, ‘no,’ but learning how to say, ‘no,’ without feeling guilty is an important lesson in both self-preservation and humility.”

ROBERT J. WEINSTOCK, MD: TIME IS THE MOST VALUABLE COMMODITY

Robert J. Weinstock, MD, of The Eye Institute of West Florida in Clearwater, Florida (www.eyespecialist.com/florida/robert-j-weinstock-m-d.htm), says his efficacy as a person and professional is all about balance. He says his ability to live a balanced life stems from spending his time wisely, with an emphasis on the word spend. “The equilibrium that I enjoy in life stems from a combination of using time very efficiently, making time for all the things I enjoy, and realizing that time is the most valuable commodity,” he comments. “When you start to think about time like something of value just like money, then you tend to be more careful about how you use it, and you plan for it accordingly.”

Dr. Weinstock says he makes a concerted effort to avoid being penny wise and pound foolish. “I’m not afraid to spend money to create more time for myself so that I can be more efficient,” he remarks. “For instance, in the [OR], I have more staff than I probably need, but it enables me to do more procedures in a shorter amount of time. Could my [OR] and my surgery center be more profitable? Absolutely, but that’s not my priority. My priority is to save that hour so I can do other things that allow me to live a happy, balanced lifestyle.”

Another example of this behavior, he says, is delegating duties to top-notch hired help. “I have a personal assistant whom I pay very well, but she is so good,” he explains. “She saves me so much time doing so many things on my behalf that she enables me to be more effective and take on more responsibilities, because we work as a team. She handles many of the logistical



Dr. Weinstock spends time enjoying water sports and fishing with his children and friends, and he makes sure to take off 1 full day each week.

aspects of my work and professional life, and because of this, I accomplish way more than I could without her.”

Investing in a personal assistant is part of Dr. Weinstock’s big-picture philosophy. “Having a personal assistant allows me to serve on more committees, take on more tasks, and have more meetings,” he says. “The list goes on and on. I used to share a personal assistant, and then, about 2 years ago, I realized I was having too much anxiety and too much stress, because I couldn’t keep up with all the demands on me. I looked at the value proposition of having my own personal assistant and what having one would do to my lifestyle, and it was the best decision that I ever made.”

What does Dr. Weinstock do with some of the time he “buys?” He runs 4 to 5 miles a day in addition to fitting in a daily low-impact exercise routine, and he has dinner with his family every night. He also spends time enjoying water sports and fishing with his children and friends, and he makes sure to take off 1 full day each week. “My goal is to be 100% present and engaged, whether I’m spending time with family or friends,” he says.

Developing a schedule that capitalizes on his body clock is critical to Dr. Weinstock's success. "I am at my best in the afternoons," he explains. "I'm more awake and aware and am best able to concentrate then, so I do between 30 to 40 refractive cataract procedures between 1 and 5 PM, and I use early mornings for reading e-mails, working on articles, and brainstorming with colleagues when I have a project in the works."

Dr. Weinstock figured out some of these things on his own, but he also says he was lucky to have his father, Stephen M. Weinstock, MD, the president and medical director of The Eye Institute of West Florida, as a role model. The senior Dr. Weinstock founded the practice in 1974. "My father paved the way and indoctrinated me in the importance of balance," the younger Dr. Weinstock comments. "He was never in a rush to see as many patients as possible or [to] break any records on the number of surgeries he could perform. He had a big-picture philosophy about lifestyle and enjoyment and balance, and I gleaned a lot of my philosophy from him."

At the midpoint of his career, the younger Dr. Weinstock says he absolutely believes that time is more valuable than money. "Overall, I will be happier and more successful if I can take care of myself and maintain a balanced state of mind," he says. "Being introspective and doing what it takes to make myself happy on a daily basis translates into making my staff happy, my patients happy, and ensuring that my practice flourishes and remains successful."

AUDREY TALLEY ROSTOV, MD: NEVER STOP LEARNING

Audrey Talley Rostov, MD, is passionate about three things: exercise, her family, and global health care. She says that focusing on what she loves helps keep her overall efficacy meter running smoothly. A cornea, cataract, and refractive surgeon in private practice with Northwest Eye Surgeons in Seattle (www.nweyes.com/audrey-r-talley-rostov-md), Dr. Talley Rostov is a multisport athlete who rises with



Dr. Talley Rostov points out that including her high school-aged daughter on one of her trips to India inspired the teenager to spend a month helping Peace Corps volunteers.

the sun each morning and runs, cycles, or swims on her own, with a personal trainer, or with a team. "Starting my day with exercise helps me start my day with good energy," she remarks. "Exercise helps me be a better, calmer, more effective, balanced person; it helps me be a better doctor and surgeon; and it helps me be a better parent and spouse."

Exercise was always a part of her life, but she started swimming a lot around the time of her medical residency. "I was working really long hours, and I began swimming with some colleagues, and I found that, the more physically active I was, the better I felt," she says. "Then, after having children, I realized that exercise was my own personal me time. It helps me achieve balance."

Professionally, she finds committee work with the American Society of Cataract & Refractive Surgery and the American Academy of Ophthalmology helps make her a better surgeon, she says, because "I'm always learning." She points out that it is time consuming but worthwhile to write papers, review articles, and participate in a high-profile way, as she did recently as a member of the American Academy

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of Ophthalmology's Preferred Practice Patterns Committee (<http://one.aao.org/guidelines-browse?filter=preferredpracticepatterns>), which she describes as a labor of love. "Committee work takes quite a lot of time, but I love to learn, and in a sense, it forces me to review current data and to keep abreast of current studies, so I find that helps me be a better professional," she says.

As a member of its medical advisory board, Dr. Talley Rostov is also involved with SightLife (www.sightlife.org), a global health organization dedicated to curing blindness worldwide. She says her participation in this effort broadens her perspective and makes her a better health care provider. "SightLife is focused on sustainability for eye banking as well as for corneal transplant[ation], so it's not about going to an underserved area and performing surgery," she explains. "It's about helping people in underserved areas gain the necessary skills and tools to do the work on their own. I travel to India and do a lot of surgeon training and try to come up with innovative ways to do skills transfer. I personally gain a lot from thinking about eye care and health care and how to make eye care and corneal transplantation accessible, sustainable, and affordable on a global basis. It's very rewarding and very different from what I do in my practice." In addition, Dr. Talley Rostov works with the Himalayan Cataract Project (www.cureblindness.org/who), an international corneal fellowship program that helps to train Ethiopian corneal surgeons. "It's great to be part of that team and to look at things from a global perspective," she says.

Last but certainly not least on Dr. Talley Rostov's list of passions is her family. She points out that including her high school-aged daughter on one of her trips to India inspired the teenager to spend a month helping Peace Corps volunteers in Senegal and that Dr. Talley Rostov's mission work also inspired her college-aged son to participate in an exchange student program in India.

"Ultimately, I think the fact that I can inspire my family members to broaden their outlook is beneficial for each of us individually and for us as a unit as well," she says. Motherhood is an incomparable experience that she credits with enhancing her nurturing skills as a health care provider, but being a wife is an equally important part of family life for her. "I think it's critical to make your spouse or partner a priority in your life, because to have a lifelong partner is a wonderful

thing, and to achieve that, the relationship requires some attention."

The two tips she would most like to share with newly minted eye surgeons are (1) strive for balance and (2) approach patients with empathy. "To young surgeons, I would say, remember to achieve balance in your life," Dr. Talley Rostov shares. "Don't get wrapped up in any one thing so much that you lose perspective about the big picture. Find something that you're passionate about, whether that's exercise or dance or yoga or art, and pursue it. Also, when you approach a patient, you should come at [him or her] from a place of feeling and remember that it's not all about you. It's easy to lose that mindset, especially after training, when you've been overwhelmed and you're run down and beaten down. It can be hard to come back up and remember what you're really doing."

KARL G. STONECIPHER, MD: A HOUSE DIVIDED CANNOT STAND

Karl G. Stonecipher, MD, director of refractive surgery at TLC in Greensboro, North Carolina (www.tlcvision.com/centers/greensboro/greensboro-lasik-surgeons/karl-g-stonecipher), says a habit that just about anyone needs to ensure success is "having your house in order." He likens this to a pilot preflight. "The first thing you do is walk around the plane and make sure everything is in order," says Dr. Stonecipher. "By doing a complete evaluation of your surroundings—whether that is your home life, your work life, or your staff—everyone has to be on the same page, because a house divided can't stand and is going to ultimately fail."

The second habit necessary for success, says Dr. Stonecipher, is a commitment to the diligent delivery of care. "You have to be almost repetitive to the point that, when something is out of the ordinary, it pops out at you," he notes. "If you see an abnormal topography for instance, you automatically know that that's different." He adds, "know what normal is, and have your staff know what normal is so that you are all on the same page with respect to the line in the sand that says whether or not the patient needs treatment and what kind of treatment or surgery the patient needs. To be a highly successful surgeon, you have to know whom not to operate on."

The third habit that Dr. Stonecipher says supports his success as a surgeon is having a successful environment. "Your patients need to feel comfortable



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—Dr. Stonecipher

in the environment where you provide service," says Dr. Stonecipher. "They have to be happy and comfortable and made to feel welcome. If they feel like cattle being driven through a maze in your practice, your efficacy and success will be compromised for sure."

The fourth habit crucial to practice/career success is having a perfect OR. "Even though a refractive surgery center OR might not have the same regulatory standards as an ambulatory surgery center, you should electively follow the same guidelines," he asserts. "Make sure the OR is constantly being cleaned and updated. A pristine OR and impeccable machinery maintenance are mandatory."

Ensuring that patients will participate in the post-operative treatment regimen is the fifth crucial habit upon which the success of a surgeon depends, according to Dr. Stonecipher. "The patient has to participate," he says. "You've got to be able to work within the economics of the patient's budget, but at the same time, you must have the patient's commitment to participation. If a patient says he or she can't take the drops three times a day for 2 weeks, then I don't want to

operate on that patient, because there is an obvious lack of commitment. I have never had an infection or an endophthalmitis case in tens of thousands of cases of LASIK and cataract surgery, and one of the things that I attribute that to is avoiding operating on patients who are not committed to carefully following my pre- and [postoperative] instructions."

Tracking outcomes is the sixth habit necessary for a successful surgical practice, according to Dr. Stonecipher. "You have to track your outcomes. It's important to know whether you lose, gain, or maintain best spectacle-corrected vision," he says. "Whether you use an Internet-based refractive analysis program or something else, the surgeons and staff should be committed to gathering the data necessary to track and benchmark results. If a patient asks, 'What is your enhancement rate,' you'll have the answer."

The final habit to which Dr. Stonecipher attributes his success as a surgeon is careful patient follow-up. "You have to follow up with the patient," he stresses. "It does not matter if you use a tool such as SurveyMonkey or an in-office paper-and-pencil survey or have your staff ask how the patient's experience was and what, if anything, could be done differently to perfect the process. This is valuable information that can help you modify things in the future."

One nonclinical habit that Dr. Stonecipher suggests improves the odds of success for him and his practice is getting a sufficient amount of sleep each night. "I need to have 7 hours of sleep," he shares. "I'm not one of those people who can function on minimal sleep. I do 30 to 40 cases in a day; if I get tired, I take a break. We like to think we're machines because we operate, but we're only human. We need to take a break."

Another nonclinical habit that Dr. Stonecipher feels improves his practice is enjoying levity with the staff so that it spills over to include the patients. "We dress up for Halloween, we chat about 'American Idol' or whatever happens to be the popular TV program of the week, and we include the patients in our chitchat," he says. "We want them to feel comfortable and welcome,

whether they are there for a consultation or a treatment or surgery.”

GARY FOSTER, MD: EMPHASIZE FAMILY HARMONY AND PEACE

Gary Foster, MD, is the medical director for The Eye Laser Center of Northern Colorado in Fort Collins, Colorado (<http://eyecenternoco.com>). He describes his surgical avocation as one that “focuses on interacting with my patients to understand their life’s ambition surrounding their vision and then to bring to bear the best technologies and techniques available in the world to help them best achieve their goals.”

Clinical and surgical success in his practice stems from setting clear goals. “I have a very clear understanding of what I want to achieve, and then I develop a plan designed to get there,” he explains. “I focus my efforts with great intensity on those areas and watch to make sure they happen. For instance, if your goal were to be a better surgeon, you would put together some site visits, gain a new skill set, review your own videos to track your progress toward achieving those new skills, and thereby you could accelerate the normal learning process and reach your goal with greater surety and speed.”

Behaviors that lead to success from a practice management perspective are similar, he says. “It’s the same principle,” he notes. “You just have to decide what you want your practice to end up looking like and favor those parts of your practice to work toward achieving excellence in those areas. Patients would then have a reason to seek you out for those skills, your reputation would grow in that area, and you would increase the availability in your schedule for those types of appointments. If you do this, part of your practice will grow at the exclusion of other parts of your practice, and that is the step that most surgeons don’t take. They don’t make a conscious decision about what they are willing to give up to get what they want most.”

One of the challenges, he says, is that “every part of ophthalmology is fun.” He continues, “If you decide that the contribution that you want to make is high-volume excellent surgery, then there are certain parts of general ophthalmology that you can’t do anymore. Otherwise, you can’t specialize enough to become an expert, and you physically can’t provide enough appointment slots to take care of all of the surgical patients and all of the other interesting aspects of general ophthalmology.”

The behaviors that he puts into play to achieve personal success and happiness include maintaining a

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—Gary Foster, MD

work-life balance. “The balance in my life comes from a daily devotional that involves scriptures, prayer, and time to ponder,” he says. “I also achieve a great deal of balance on the daily walks that I have with my wife.” Although a busy surgical practice spread across several satellite offices could easily get in the way of those habits, he says, he does not let it. “Your professional goals will invariably compete for peace and family harmony, so if you have a clear definition of what you want to achieve—and if one of those goals is peace—then you have to periodically hold your life up to examination to see if you are meeting that standard. If your desire is heartfelt to have family harmony and peace, then you have to go in with your scalpel and carve out blocks of time and create the emphasis necessary for success in those other areas.” ■

William Culbertson, MD, may be reached at (305) 243-2020; wculbertson@med.miami.edu.

Gary Foster, MD, may be reached at (970) 221-2222; gilfos@gmail.com.

Karl G. Stonecipher, MD, is the director of refractive surgery at TLC in Greensboro, North Carolina. Dr. Stonecipher may be reached at (336) 288-8523; stonenc@aol.com.

Audrey R. Talley Rostov, MD, may be reached at (206) 528-6000; atalleyrostov@nweyes.com.

Robert J. Weinstock, MD, is in private practice at the Eye Institute of West Florida, in Clearwater, Florida. Dr. Weinstock may be reached at (727) 585-6644; rjweinstock@yahoo.com.

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Rochelle Nataloni welcomes ideas for future articles about innovative strategies that are helping you elevate your practice to the “premium” level. She may be reached at rnk2020@comcast.net.