

# Ask the Expert

**Sean Barnard**





*The most important thing is you have to have a set of core values that truly means something.*

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Sean Barnard serves as Chief Operating Officer for privately held North Carolina based Smiles Ahead. His role oversees five brands of dentistry that include Burrow Welchel & Culp Orthodontics, White & Johnson Pediatrics, Charlotte Pediatric Dentistry, Signature Smiles Orthodontics and Dogwood Family Dentistry. His international career spans from Europe and the Caribbean to the U.S. and includes C-Level suite positions in gaming, hospitality, manufacturing, and healthcare.

Starting his career as a casino dealer in England in 1979, he moved into junior management before emigrating to the Bahamas in 1984. In 1991 Sean was recruited to join a management team opening one of the first casinos in North America to be built outside Las Vegas or Atlantic City.

Sean enjoyed several leadership positions within the gaming and hospitality industry and worked throughout the United States. As Senior Vice President of one of the largest casinos in the U.S., he was responsible for over 1 million square feet of resort space with 1,500 employees, close to \$250 million in annual revenue and over \$85 million in EBTIDA. Sean served as President of the Missouri Gaming Association and on several non-profit boards before 'retiring' in 2014.

In 2016, the introduction to Dr. Dustin Burleson led to Fifty-Eight LLC, a consultancy that grew in reputation and size with a range of clients across the US. Sean has been a keynote speaker with a presentation that challenges how we all think of HR and leadership. Sean is a Society for Human Resource Management Certified Professional and Certified Kolbe Consultant.

**Dustin Burleson:**

All right. Welcome everyone. I'm so excited to have Sean Barnard on the program. Sean, thanks for being here tonight.

**Sean Barnard:**

Thank you.

**Dustin Burleson:**

You have a new book?

**Sean Barnard:**

I do.

**Dustin Burleson:**

I know you don't have any free time so I'm curious, it wasn't because you had time to kill, why did you write the book?

**Sean Barnard:**

Where do I even start? Probably a conversation with you somewhere along the line. I think everybody thinks that a book gets written in a couple of weeks. It didn't. It was three years.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Three years, yeah.

**Sean Barnard:**

I sort of put a timeline aside and said a year, and of course it extended between career changes, if you like, and opening the consultancy, and then ending up in Charlotte, North Carolina. It just took forever. So the big post-it notes

on my walls have finally disappeared with all the scribble that I had.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Well, congrats. It's a fantastic book. Anyone listening, watching, who's in healthcare, or leads a team, or wants to lead a team should get and read the book. It's fantastic. It's called [\*Intentional Retention\*](#), and you have a lot of experience in this. Maybe we walk listeners through your background? How'd you get to where you are today?

**Sean Barnard:**

Well, I'll give you the shorter version, because I go back quite a few years now, but I started in the casino industry as a dealer, dealing roulette. And you can't earn a great wage in casinos in England. I don't know about today, but certainly when I first started back in the late seventies, there was no such thing as a great living wage. So Brits usually did one of three things. They went to Botswana in South Africa, Sun City, or they went on the cruise ships, or they went to the Bahamas. I went to the Bahamas, built a career in casinos, and then got recruited to come to the United States in 1991. I came here, opened one of the first riverboat casinos in Peoria, Illinois, bounced around several states, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Michigan, you name it, ended up in Kansas City where I met you and ran a big casino there with a mighty big footprint of a million square feet, 1,500-plus team members. That was the highlight of my career before it ended in 2014. Along the way, I met a lot of different people, led a lot of different teams, built teams, changed teams, and learned a lot, like I say, along the way.

**Dustin Burleson:**

What did you learn managing 1,500 people? Because I've learned so much from you directly through things you've taught me, but also indirectly just in observing how you understand human nature and how you can lead people, but what was that like having 1,500 team members?

**Sean Barnard:**

A lot of fun. Well, needless to say, the biggest complaint, and everybody gets this, it doesn't matter whether you run a company with 25 people or 2,500 people, everybody says that communication is the bigger thing. It's like, "Nobody ever tells us anything. Nobody ever communicates anything. We're the last to find out." So that's always a challenge, and it is with 1,500 team members. So we would do regular town hall meetings and meet with as many people as we could. We would make them mandatory and it didn't matter. We still got told, "You never tell us anything."

But what I learned along the way as my career progressed, I really watched for 20-30 years that the middle management level team member was being stripped out. So you saw directors working and doing a lot of managerial duties. You saw a lot of managers doing supervisory duties. You saw a lot of supervisors doing frontline duties. And along that way, nobody was teaching anybody how to be a great leader. Nobody was teaching people how to manage people. So the effort that goes into a lot of companies, even today, primarily today, is you see people get trained how to put the widgets in the box and mail the widgets out, but you don't get anybody that says, "Let me sit you down. Let me show you how to lead your

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team and be a great human being where people want to work for you, or go they want to work for the company." And that has just disappeared over the last 20-30 years. Nobody trains people. So people are ill prepared. People get promoted often way before they're ready. But, again, they have the technical skills of how to do them, put the widgets in the box, but they just don't know how to lead people. That's really what it's like.

**Dustin Burleson:**

I find that so interesting because in dentistry the ADA often has little white papers and statements they'll issue during times of economic challenge. And one of those right now is, maybe cross train your team, make sure

your front desk knows how to clip a wire in an orthodontic practice, for example. But no one talks about teaching them how to communicate better or how to lead better. We just had Sally Susman on the program. She's the chief communications officer at Pfizer, and she was there when they built the vaccine in eight months and had to communicate that to the public. And it was amazing hearing her story, and she said the same thing, "We have all these different things we train on and almost never do we think about communication," down to the science of writing a simple thank you note that you're very good at doing. And I've learned, my mom and dad beat that into my head, to write thank you notes. What have you taken from that experience of having 1,500 employees? Now, fast-forward, you're the COO of a very large and continuing to grow group. What have you taken from that experience of learning how to communicate more frequently that you've seen work well in dentistry and orthodontics and, particularly, pediatric dentistry?

**Sean Barnard:**

A couple of things. I think that it's really become apparent, having been in hospitality industry with gaming. So gaming casinos is not just gambling, it's also running hotels. It's running restaurants. We had a daycare. We had a movie theater. So there's a lot of different components with that. And then moving into the world of orthodontics, I had a short stint helping, frankly, a friend of mine, I took the position of CEO over for him. And had a small manufacturing company with about 100 team members. And then into orthodontics and now running Smiles Ahead and this group, it doesn't matter

what the industry is, human beings are human beings are human beings. So you get, "Well, we're a little bit different because we're in the world of dental." No, you're not. You're still human beings, and human beings still need that love and affection. They need the attention. They need the communication. They need leadership, period. They need the leadership that helps them stay.

And as a segue, I wanted to remember to say that I left a post the other day. There's this common saying that's been going around for the 30-40 years that I've been working which is, "Oh, today's generation, they're the worst. They don't want to work." And I think you may have seen it, I left a post the other day on LinkedIn which said, "What did our parents say about us? Is it exactly the same? And their parents said exactly the same about them?" So you're not going to change this generation, and that generation won't change the next generation. Figure it out, work with them, and bring the best out of them. If you can bring the best out in this generation, you'll get a great workforce.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Yeah, I'm inspired by... And of course I'm biased. I have kids in this new generation, but they seem to be more self-aware. They seem to be more tolerant and accepting and just aware of life's multitudes, and not just work, work, work. Where I think my grandparents and my parents were just work, work, work, get the house, get the cars, define your success through your achievements and through your economic bank account number, and not through how much time you spent with charity, or how much time you spent with your hobby, and I feel like this



generation has that better. Someone said it pretty wisely, I think, and I'm going to paraphrase, but it was like, "It's not that they don't want to work, they're just not willing to work for crap jobs." Right? So I see this, we're adding all these jobs, and I'm like, "Well, are we adding good jobs? Or are we adding low wage jobs? A lot of people are saying, "I'm not going to slave away on an assembly line or as a line cook for nine bucks an hour during a pandemic." They just said, "Enough is enough." So I think it's high time I think we probably figured out how to make jobs where people have that stability, right? They know... Again, I had this conversation. I went down and spoke to the residents in Alabama and I had this conversation with the cab driver. And he said, "Oh, Bernie Sanders is here this week," because he said Alabama has one of the lowest minimum wages. And I guess I could Google and find out, but it was like abysmally low. I think I want to say in Kansas City, we're at 15 bucks an hour. So let's see what... If Google is correct, if it's correct, it's 2023 minimum wage in Alabama is \$7.25 cents an hour.

So I made the comment like, "Gosh, how does a single mom take care of two kids and try to get them to school and get herself to work if she doesn't know what her schedule's going to be like tomorrow?" And he said, "Take care of two kids? Try taking care of yourself. I'm a cab driver. I make way more than seven bucks an hour." Some of these people have degrees and they're coming out... And, anyways, I got on a small tangent that I think this generation has a lot of promise. And you're right, every generation was painted as this lazy consumer. The music they listen to is going to rot their brains. The TV they watch is going to rot their brains. Social media is

going to rot their brain. I mean, this is the same stuff over and over again.

**Sean Barnard:**

It's funny that you watch leaders as well, and I call them leaders as opposed to managers, directors, but leaders in all industries, also the same people that are saying, "This generation doesn't want to work," et cetera, I have often said to the same people, "But would you? How is your lifestyle? Can you change jobs? Could you leave tomorrow if you found a better job at a better..." Well, yeah. "So do you really want to work and answer emails at 11 o'clock at night? Or have to come in at the weekend? Or be told to go to him at, do you enjoy all of that?" Well, no. "Well, they're no different from you then, really, are they?"

**Dustin Burleson:**

We tend to forget about all that once we've kind of made it past some of these hurdles. We joked years ago that the dental boards, as I'm sure, as you hire a lot of dentists, you understand all the hoops and stuff that they have to jump through. And it's a horrible process where you've got to get patients and you got to fly them to... If you're taking an out-of-state board, you've got to fly them to that location and pray to God they make their flight and show up. And some of these patients are not reliable. And we do all these things and, while we're in the moment, we think, "We need to change this. This process is awful." And then you pass and you're like, "Ah, let the next generation figure it out." Right?

**Sean Barnard:**

Figure it out.

**Dustin Burleson:**

So I think that's often in an industry you look at people that are at the top, or in associations, the people at the top are so far removed from the day-to-day concerns of the front lines, which is what you're really good at is understanding the front lines of the organization. So I loved some of the examples you told me of hiring at the casino where you say, "Hey, did you fill up their tray with 15 glasses of water? Put them in high heels. All right, let's take around. Let's see, because this is going to be you at midnight, and by the way, it's Christmas, and it's also your birthday, and do you still want this job?" I think the front lines is so important. Can you talk about how you are staying in touch with your front lines and helping retain people, to the point of the book? What's that been like at Smiles Ahead, trying to retain not just the people but the culture?

**Sean Barnard:**

Yeah. I think, well, number one, the most important thing, and I talk about it in the book, is you have to have a set of core values that truly means something. And once you've set them, don't just pick fancy words, don't go to chat GPT and figure out that they'll create your core values. They probably will, or it probably will. But at the same time, build them from the heart. And, really, once you've got them... And don't have 10 of them. Five, I always think, is about the right number to have for your core values. And then live by them, because I preach all the time and pretty much all the jobs that I've had of any significance, "Once you've got those core values, live by them. Don't ever



*The fun part of core values and how I think you can help your team members understand how you tick and you understand better how they tick and how you can take care of them is, once you've got those core values and you live by them, refer to them frequently.*

deviate them from them." But the fun part of core values and how I think you can help your team members understand how you tick and you understand better how they tick and how you can take care of them is, once you've got those core values and you live by them, refer to them frequently.

As an example, if we have a team member that's pretty upset about something or we're upset with the team member, we refer to the core values. So it might be, "Should we say goodbye to this team member because they did X, Y, and Z?" Well, did they violate the core values? And ours are very simple. It's, service, the patient always comes first, teamwork, all for one, one for all, ethics, simply doing the right thing, promises once we make them, we never break them, and then, standards, better than yesterday, even better tomorrow.

So if you've got a team member who is in a crisis situation, maybe an abusive situation at home and they need some help because they can't make it at eight o'clock in the morning. They've got to drop their kids off. Now, suddenly, they've become a single parent and you need to help them. Well, you refer to the core values and you say, "Well, we sort of made a promise that we'd be ethical people, because that's in there, but we're going to figure out teamwork as well." If you use those core values, then you don't say goodbye to that team member because they're in a rotten situation. You work with them as a team, you keep the promise that we're going to work with you ethically, and these are our standards. It's right there for you. I don't know that's a great example, but it's really trying to think from the team member's perspective. And another philosophy, if you like, is who is the team member's advocate? You should be, as well as you should always be the patient's advocate. You have to think how the patient is thinking.

We had a big discussion yesterday, funny enough, about dismissals. And I won't get into what I discovered, but it was okay, "Everybody flip the script at the minute. Have you ever missed an appointment for God's sake? Have you ever?" Well, we get screamed at down the phone. Wouldn't you? So being the team member's advocate, patients we've got to take care of, but there shouldn't be any difference in the emphasis of how you take care of your patients to how you take care of your team members, advocate for them. And think about, have you ever had two jobs? I did when I was 18. You probably did as well. You went to work on your day job, and then you went and did four hours or eight hours doing something

else because you could. You didn't need sleep. So a lot of our team members have two jobs. They're exhausted, they're tired. A lot of them are single parents. A lot of them live paycheck to paycheck.

I don't know a lot of their situations, but if you can try and think as best you can, what their life must be like and put yourself in their shoes, just be good to them and think of them as human beings.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Yeah. It's amazing how many policies are for the company and not for the patient. If you're more than 15 minutes late-

**Sean Barnard:**

Mm-hmm, yeah. Find a way to say yes, whenever you can, to a patient. Obviously, to your customers or your patients or your guests, whatever industry you're in, but if you can find a way to say yes to your team members as well, say it.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Yeah, it's fun. We did that little exercise. Just play any scenario and just all the other person can say and role playing is, yes.

**Sean Barnard:**

Yes.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Be like, "Can we have ice cream for breakfast?" Yes. "And then can we go to Worlds of Fun?" Yes. "And then we can stay up until midnight?" It's just a fun... it kind of gives you this idea and feeling of what it's like to say, yes. We

learned it from you, or the Ritz Carlton, or someone much smarter than me, but it was kind of standard issue in our clinics before I exited in private equity is it took one person to say yes and two people to say no. Right? Most businesses, it's the opposite. Can I get extra side of ketchup or mustard? Well, it's 25 cents. Or, can I have an extra... Well, and it's one person to say, no. Can we change our reservation? No. Can we get a room facing the ocean? No. Right? And so smart companies, it's you can say yes-

**Sean Barnard:**

Find ways to say, yes.

**Dustin Burleson:**

On your own. Find a way to say, yes. And it's not always, give them everything they want, but sometimes it is... Our classic was a parent who would miss a 7:00 or a 6:00, a very coveted time for our clinics. We were open late and open early. And they would miss one of those, and they would want the same appointment tomorrow, and they just missed a 6:00 PM appointment that takes forever to get. They're like, "Well, I can't be there, but can I get 6:00 tomorrow?" And you want to say, "Are you crazy?" So find a way to say yes and, "So we keep you on track with your appointment, Dr. Burleson wanted to see you in six weeks. That's now. So let's get you in tomorrow at 10:30, but we'll get your next appointment in six weeks, let's get that one at 6:00 PM. How does that sound?" Finding a way to say yes them, and it's amazing how often, if you don't train employees, they will say no, right?

**Sean Barnard:**

Yes.



*You already know that you should always be the patient's advocate. But who is the team member's advocate? How do we keep our promises and work with each individual to maintain our standards?*

**Dustin Burleson:**

And you don't realize that you've lost that frontline obsession with customer service because people are being told no.

**Sean Barnard:**

I think the other word that goes with this conversation is empower them, just empower them. I have plenty of stories on this, but it's amazing how frontline team members trained well, empowered well, are more protective of your assets than you will ever believe. They become owners per se of the challenge.

So if it's dismissals of a patient because they've missed so many appointments, don't give them all of the reasons of why you should dismiss a patient. Figure out how many ways you can keep that patient because they've missed three appointments. So yes, they have, dig in a little bit, but to your point, find a way to say, "Yes, we'd love to have you back. You've missed three appointments. I do have to



share with you that this is a bit of a challenge for us because it disrupts..." whatever. Talk about it, but empower them to make it right and make the patient still there. Who wins? We do. We make money. It's crazy.

**Dustin Burleson:**

I always had that answer. I was like, "I like paychecks. Do you like a paycheck?" The patient signs our paycheck, literally. We always say we're going to say yes until we're forced to say no. We're not going to tolerate an abusive patient. We're not going to tolerate a patient who's not complying and putting their child in harm. A mom who brings a kid to anesthesia and forgot to not feed him, "You just ate, we got to reschedule your sedation." So safety first, and say yes until we're forced to say no, it's a great policy.

**Sean Barnard:**

Absolutely.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Go ahead and talk about retention, because I think sometimes I would be guilty of this. I'd see the book and go, "Okay, I'm going to get religion about retaining my team," but this starts way before that. Can you talk about from how we hire to onboard? When does retention really begin?

**Sean Barnard:**

I think it really does start day one if you want them to stay. The biggest opportunity for people to leave is within the first 90 days. And how do you find that out? You find out by asking them, "Did we keep the promise?" So we've

now created a habit of asking team members after a very short time. Do it after seven days, or the first week. Ask them after the first 30. Check in with them the next 60. How do you do that? Put it on your calendar. I know that somebody might say, "Wow, I had all these people start, how would I possibly remember that?" Well, if you've got that many people starting, you might have a bigger problem than I thought. But it's not hard just to put on your calendar, "Dustin started today. I'm going to put on my calendar that next Wednesday. I'm going to talk to him and say to him."

A couple of things, "Dustin, was it all that you thought it would be? Have you found anything that maybe there was a disconnect in the way that we interviewed you and what we promised you? How is it? We told you it was going to be fun and you enjoy working with these people? Do you know who your supervisor is? Do you know who to go to if your paycheck is wrong? Has anybody checked in with you? How is onboarding? Did you have fun?" These conversations can take 10 minutes and the team member walks away and goes, "I have a link and I know that somebody actually cares about the first five, seven days. And I actually know that I could go to them. And it wasn't just my immediate supervisor, it was a manager, it was a director, it was the CEO, it was the GM," whatever it is.

The owner took 10 minutes out of their day and that's great investment, because you might find something out. You might. Dustin might turn around and say, "Well, actually..." as happened to me once, and I refer to in the book, somebody worked for me a while and said, "I'm



*Retention really does start day one if you want them to stay. The biggest opportunity for people to leave is within the first 90 days. And how do you find that out? You find out by asking them, 'Did we keep the promises we made to you? Was it all that you thought it would be? Have you found anything that maybe there was a disconnect in the way that we interviewed you and what we promised you? How is it?'*

pretty mad because the bathroom is not 500 yards or whatever it was, half-a-mile away down the road. There's one straight across the opposite of my office. I'm pretty frustrated by that." It was somebody who worked in human resources, so I felt really bad. But it was so indicative of how we had not communicated just the basics, where the break room is, where the restrooms are, where do you go if your paycheck is wrong? Because team members will figure out pretty quickly you don't care, just don't care. Or you are just one of those, as we used to get called, you're a suit, and that's all you are. You're just a suit and you don't care about us. You don't even know who we are.

So I think retention does start day one, and then it goes on from there. Don't just think after I've checked in with them after a week and after 30 days and after 60 days

they're home free. You should be checking in with them quarterly at the very least. Again, it takes 10 minutes to say, "How are you doing? How's everything going? You happy?" Ask that question, "Are you happy?" It's very, very important. And then of course the review period is just critical for me. Reviews have to go out two weeks in advance. You don't suddenly turn up. It is, for me, the team member's work birthday, so celebrate it. Whether the review is good or bad, it doesn't matter, celebrate them, celebrate the day because it's all about them. And at the end, the most important question is, how could I have been a better leader for you? How can I be a better leader for you in the next year? It's critical. And if you've really done a good job, they will tell you, and you better be ready for what they're going to tell you. Memos come out late. "I really think that my supervisor... We've run out of supplies and we have to beg for them," whatever it is, find out. "I haven't seen you for the last six months," is a good one. Sorry, I need to do a better job.

**Dustin Burleson:**

There's so much to unpack there because it's so good. I think a lot of people listening to this or watching are solo practitioners. They have 10 to 12 employees and they simply want to focus on being a good doctor. And they hire someone and think, okay, they can check that off their list. There's no formal onboarding. They assign them to a mentor to... There's no true supervisor. No one knows that. It's so smart, the one week check-in, to see how they're doing. That makes them less likely to ghost or quit a job when they go back to their spouse or their partner and say, "Yeah, there's some challenges but, boy, I really like Sean and he cares about me," whoever that

supervisor would be, because you took the time. Probably one of the few organizations a lot of... I feel like in dentistry a lot of dental assistants go from office to office, or maybe a big clinic to a small clinic, but they don't often switch entire careers, so they're comparing you to other dentists.

**Sean Barnard:**

Absolutely.

**Dustin Burleson:**

And most of those other dentists have never taken that one week check-in and there's no formal review process, and it would make it real easy to feel like they're not even going to miss me here. Where, if you've checked in and you've asked how I'm doing and you've asked if I'm happy, I'm more likely maybe to stick because I have a relationship with the person there who's looking out for me. It might not be the doctor. It could be the doctor, but it could be their direct supervisor. I've worked for some large places, and particularly at the hospital, and if they watch this and they're upset, they can give me a call and we can talk about it. But there's 10,000 employees there. I've never met my supervisor face-to-face. It's only via email. So I have a wonderful relationship with my direct report, who's the chair of dentistry. We have a great relationship, but the person who signs the paycheck and is responsible for requests I have, I've never met. And I just think, what are you all thinking?

It'd be so easy for me to say, "Adios," and he would never know until I sent him the email. I just think the connection and communication is so important, and I've

learned that from you. I want to highlight one great... I think some little pearls I've learned from you and in hiring is to ask them, and this is your question, "What would make you quit?" And I just love to see the wheels start to turn in their head and go... First of all, that's a question I think that indicates the company asking you that cares. We do want to know what... And they'll start to say things that now they're identifying their personal core values, and we want to make sure that those mesh.

I shared this example, I think, with you, and perhaps we've written about it. We had a great dental assistant who around every winter would start to really suffer in her performance and her just general attitude until we learned from you to start talking to them more frequently. It was that she was always nervous to drive in the snow, so we found, because she would then communicate with us because we finally asked in a little weekly assessment. She put a big frown-y face. We always asked them to rate how their week was. Ashley came up with this big smiley face to kind of neutral, to frown-y face. When she circled it a couple of times, were like, "Hey, what's going on?" She's like, "I'm not from here. I do not do winter driving. I'm from the south. I hate this." So we had to pair her up with another clinical assistant who lived close by that had four-wheel drive, and suddenly she was happy again, but it's because we asked. I just appreciate you sharing that because we learned that from you.

So I got on a bit of a tangent there, but where would you recommend a doctor listening to this who says, "Listen, we've never done a core values exercise. We have no idea what that's like?" Where should they start? How long does

that process take? Any advice for someone who says, "We need to come together as a team and define who we are?"

**Sean Barnard:**

Figure out what's really important to you. Figure out what's really important to you and then don't hesitate to ask your team members what's important to them. So service, for us. Again, it's service, teamwork, ethics, promises, and standards. But is it so hard to figure out that those five things... And maybe I could probably come up with another five or another 10, but you hone it down so that you cover everything, and service should really matter to everybody. Every single business, it should really matter. Standards, I love the word standards, because it doesn't matter whether it's a standard of making sure reviews go out on time, if your standard is checking in with a brand new team member, standards are clean bathrooms. Standards, I know for you was landscaping outside every one of your practices. You were fanatical about it and it meant a lot to you. That was a standard, but everybody on your team knew that that was important to you, so whatever it is that's really important to you.

And then choose your words really carefully. And I say that to make sure that it doesn't come across as fluffy, we're going to talk up here for our team members who just want the basic language. So, again, keep it simple, stupid, I think, is a really good way to think of core values. Again, don't pick too many of them, but use words that they can remember because I would like to think that a lot of our team members do know our core values. I expect my direct reports to know the core values of my heart be

able to quote them, and I can't do that if you get some of the ridiculous long sentences. And I use a few of the examples in the book, Dell, Hershey came out with some really interesting ones. Of course, Enron is one of my favorites.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Enron, it's all about integrity.

**Sean Barnard:**

Yeah. But keep it simple, stupid. Make sure that they really do mean something to you, and then run them past your team members. And I've done that with frontline, as well as middle leadership, as well as senior leadership. If you run them past those, you will get somebody in the room that says, "I have no idea what that means. That doesn't mean anything to me." So you can debate it. Have a good mix of people. If you're a small practice with a dozen people, or six, seven people, have a fun after-hours, let's just talk about our core values because they're not my core values, they're going to be our core values. And a good test is if you're proud of them and you really feel strongly about them, put them where your team members see them, but put them where your patients see them because that's who we are. And your team members should be able to point to them and go, "Those are our team... our core values, and we're really proud of them because I was a part of building them." So make them a team effort.

And just going back to retention, a thought occurred to me while you were talking that I think a lot of small business owners and leaders think that if we do an after-hours



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party, if we do a potluck lunch, or if I do a huddle in the morning with everybody, I've connected with my team. You really haven't because the shy person stands at the back and thinks that this isn't really about them. The outgoing quick-start will thoroughly enjoy that potluck, or that after-hours party, or the get-together, or the day trip out. But rather than spend an hour talking to six people, why don't you spend 10 minutes talking to six people individually, because then it's personal and it really does go a long way? But, yeah, core values can be fun. Written well and easily remembered is the secret.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Is that something you've implemented with your managers at Smiles Ahead? Are they trained and then

measured on the amount of times they interact with their direct reports?

**Sean Barnard:**

Yes. I would like to say that I am a champion of it. I will be a complete hypocrite if I said that because I would like to spend more time in the field than I do. Unfortunately, with anything administrative, you find yourself... you find excuses to stay behind the desk all day as opposed to getting out. So I do put it on my calendar that I need to go to Gastonia, or I need to go to Kannapolis, and I try and get out there as often as I possibly can. But going back to the core values, anytime that the leader has a challenge, "Should I do this? Or shouldn't I do that?" what does the core values tell you? And if you keep hammering that home, they'll tell you, "Well, I made this decision because the core values told me to do it."

**Dustin Burleson:**

Got it, nailed it, yeah.

**Sean Barnard:**

Yeah, we do focus on staying in touch with our team members a lot.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Do you have a preference or a strategy on hiring leaders? Do you try to promote from within? Do you try to recruit externally?

**Sean Barnard:**

It's a fine balance. So we're just over 230 team members now. When I joined, I think we were about 85, so we're at

235 right now. So we go internal first. But at the same time, there's a fine balance before, you haven't got some outside influences, you haven't got some fresh new ideas coming in. So, yeah, I try and balance it. So office managers, for every three or four that we may promote, because we didn't have office managers at each of our locations and we chose to go that route last year, but we did a balance. It was probably 25% to 75%, 75% internal, but 25% fresh blood, fresh perspectives, people that could really show you a different way to skin the rabbit. It was just a good move for us.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Cool. That's a good mix. I want to make sure everyone has a chance to learn about the book, where to go get it, how to learn more about you. I've been kind of gently encouraging, sometimes not so gently encouraging you all... because I know you don't need to sleep, encouraging you all to bring opportunities for clients to show up, maybe to come see what you all are doing in North Carolina. Where can they learn more about you if they wanted to get more involved, or at least take some of these principles in their own practice?

**Sean Barnard:**

Sure. So if you go to [Sean-Barnard.com](http://Sean-Barnard.com) then you can find a little bit more about me. I'd love to host you in North Carolina. Charlotte is a fantastic city. I miss Kansas City a lot, world champions of a lot of things, so I do miss that. I don't miss barbecue because I'm a pescatarian. But that aside, Charlotte is a really warm, hospitable city. We've got a lot of offices now, so every time I look, my boss, CEO and founder Dr. Jack Burrow is walking in my office and

going, "Guess what? We're adding another office, or we're about to add another one in the next couple of weeks," which is a lot of fun.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Like DJ Khaled, another one.

**Sean Barnard:**

Yes.

**Dustin Burleson:**

He's just dropping offices on your desk.

**Sean Barnard:**

I said to him about a month ago, he announced another acquisition, and I just looked at him, because I wasn't aware that we were about to do this one, and I said, "Where are we off to now, cowboy?" That's just what it's like. It's a lot of fun. This is a very healthy, energetic company that's on a fast trajectory for growth. And, yeah, come to Charlotte. We'd be happy to show you around, show you what we do, how much fun we're having, and how you can integrate new offices and open de novos at the same time.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Cool. Congrats on the book.

**Sean Barnard:**

Thank you.

**Dustin Burleson:**

I love that you did it. I know it took a long time, three years, three times as long to birth a book than to birth a baby, and probably more painful. I shouldn't say that, but-

**Sean Barnard:**

Yes, absolutely.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Congrats on the book. I can't talk now. We'll post links to the book and post links to your website and more about BWC and Smiles Ahead.

**Sean Barnard:**

Great.

**Dustin Burleson:**

Sean, thanks for being here.

**Sean Barnard:**

Thank you. Appreciate it.

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