

## **How Orthodontists Think**

*By Roger P. Levin, DDS*

As an orthodontist, do you play mind games with yourself in the course of each day in the practice? The odds are very good that you do. There's a good reason why this happens. For other types of professionals, business management is a subject taught in classrooms. For orthodontists, it is basically an on-the-job learning experience. Is it any wonder that you could be telling yourself things that are patently untrue?

The truth is that orthodontic practices can engage in quite a variety of mind games. The trouble is – your practice productivity can be adversely affected. To get past your mind games, you first have to identify them. The following are five of the most prevalent lies orthodontists tell themselves:

**“We’re too busy to make any changes in my practice right now.”**

If you think about it, this statement doesn't really make much sense. Just how busy are you? *Every* practice is busy. Is your practice more chaotic than busy? If so, you are working very, very hard for income. Just how long do you think you can burn the candle at both ends like this? If you insist on running the practice at breakneck speed, you can certainly do so – but eventually the train is going to come off the tracks. In the end, the only thing left to do is make bets on who burns out first, you or the team.

You need to step back and assess the situation. As the leader of your practice, you should always be prepared to create change. Embracing and initiating change keeps your practice vibrant. Change can help you redefine your goals and make your practice better. Change can pave the way for better customer service. Most importantly, change can help ensure the growth of your practice and ultimately, your financial independence.

**“Morning meetings aren’t worth it. They just turn into ‘gripe’ sessions.”**

Even the best intentions can be put to the wrong use. Morning meetings are one of the best things you can do for yourself and your staff. Remember, a little complaining is OK. It helps some people let off steam. However, it can't end there. Otherwise, the meeting ends with the sense of, “Well, we just depressed ourselves enormously. Let's get out there and see if we can sink even lower.” Let's face it – a meeting like that isn't even worth having. On the other hand, a positive and solutions-oriented morning meeting can make all the difference in office morale. It sets the tone for the day. Keep in mind that the meeting is about identifying the pitfalls and creating solutions. The end of the meeting should always feel upbeat, like, “Everyone is doing a great job. We're hitting our goals. Let's go!”

**“The only way to motivate my staff is to pay them more.”**

Hold on, not so fast with the cash, doctor. Compensation is important, but it's not the only thing that makes staff members happy with their jobs. People want to be appreciated. Many orthodontists are tempted to say, "Isn't that what a paycheck is for?" Yes – partially. But most people appreciate being... well, appreciated! It can be as simple as saying "thank you" or "nice job" after a team member has completed a task or somehow gone above and beyond in their responsibilities.

Your appreciation can be shown in any number of ways, which can be as simple or stylish as you prefer. You could treat the team to lunch or breakfast after a stressful or trying week. Or, you could take the entire team to an amusement park for a day. Whatever option you choose, socializing outside of the office is an excellent way to motivate people *and* build team cohesiveness.

### **“My staff knows how to do everything.”**

There are two situations that shoot holes in this thinking pretty quickly. First, let's assume that your staff really **does** know how to do everything. The question is – how long will that last. It could be a year or it could be next week. Your office does not function in a vacuum. Things are always changing. New technology is introduced, office policies evolve, etc. If your team members don't catch up to the changes, two things will happen. They will quickly become frustrated and patients will likely receive compromised customer service.

Your team may know everything. Trouble is – your team is not going to be together forever. When new people join the team, they could have a very difficult time learning “everything” if systems and procedures are poorly documented. This is quite common with teams that have been together for a long time. They don't bother to document what everyone already knows. However, every long-term team splits up eventually because people will move, change jobs or retire. Be prepared with documented systems. That way your organizational knowledge survives despite staff turnover.

### **“I can't fire her. I know she doesn't work well with the team but she's so good with the patients.”**

What if the situation was reversed? What if an assistant was good with the staff but absolutely terrible with the patients? Would you hesitate terminating this individual for one moment? Probably not. Granted, you may not need to fire her. It may simply be a case of giving her additional training so that she better understands her responsibilities and how to work as part of a team. However, if that doesn't work, keeping her on could be highly detrimental to your practice. Other highly-qualified individuals may leave the practice because they can't work with her. You may be pulled from chair-side to put out fires that she has caused. If the time comes for such a decision, don't be afraid to make it.

### **Conclusion**

Protective lies are easy to create. They are much more difficult to destroy. Why? In every instance, these lies provide a false sense of comfort to their creator.

To have a growing practice, you must tackle difficult issues like these head-on. Moving beyond these ways of thinking will in effect set you free to become not only more successful but much happier as well.

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