



ORTHO2

Eight Management Mistakes Orthodontists Make

by **Dr. Roger P. Levin**

If I could just focus on the orthodontics, everything would be great." I've heard that statement or something like it from countless orthodontists over the years. It's totally understandable. You went to dental school and completed your orthodontic residency to learn how to be a clinician, not a practice owner.

But here you are in 2017, an owner of an orthodontic practice. For all intents and purposes, your office does pretty well. You have a strong team, your patients like you, and, even though you're not Warren Buffett, you've managed to pick up enough business knowledge along the way to do a decent job of running a financially successful practice.

But boy, there are some days when you wish you didn't have to deal with all these management-related issues. One way to get better at almost anything is by learning what NOT to do.

Here are eight practice management mistakes that every orthodontist should avoid:

1. Outdated Systems

As systems age, they become more inefficient, which increases stress and decreases production. Systems should be replaced every 3–5 years. Your practice is in a constant state of change. Some changes may be small, others big, and over time, as more changes occur—technology, services, personnel, etc.—your systems become obsolete. At the time they were created, they were an operational snapshot of the office as it was, but that practice has continued to morph in the intervening years, so those original systems are no longer an accurate reflection of how the office currently operates. This dissonance produces incredible stress on the team. The older the systems, the greater the stress!

2. Poor Communication

Many orthodontists don't share essential information with their teams. Does your staff know the practice vision? What about the practice's goals for annual production, referrals, starts, and overhead? Do you review progress on performance targets once a week at the morning meeting?

Too often doctors believe team members don't need to know such information. By keeping your team in the dark, you're sending them blindly into the future—where they can't help but stumble repeatedly!

3. Clinging to the Status Quo

I get it. Change isn't easy. But holding onto the inefficient, the dysfunctional, and the under-performing just because you're familiar with them, doesn't make a whole lot of sense especially over the course of your career. That reception area painted hunter green may have looked great in 1993, but not so much anymore. That templated geocities website may have been state-of-the-art sometime in the last century, but now it's just a crumbling fossil of a time gone by. These may be extreme examples, but we all have a tendency to hold on to things because we're comfortable with them. As one of my former mentors once said to me, "If you want to grow, you've got to let go." I'm not saying you have to jump on every trend, but you don't want to live in a time capsule either.

4. Stop-and-Go Marketing

You put some killer strategies in place for parent and doctor referrals and they start paying off like

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gangbusters. Your consult schedule is booked for the next two months. Your starts are skyrocketing. With everything going so well, you believe you can put the brakes on marketing. But once you do, things eventually slow down. Then you start to panic and say, "We need to ramp up our marketing and quick!"

The better strategy is to keep your foot on the accelerator. You will retire some strategies and rotate others, but marketing should be consistent and ongoing. If your marketing is working, why stop it? Let it continue to fill your schedule with new patients!

5. Not Asking for the Close

You can give the greatest ortho presentation in the world, but if you fail to ask for the close, you will lose a lot of cases. Don't assume parents will volunteer a yes. You have to ask them point-blank if they would like their child to receive the benefits of orthodontic treatment at your office. It seems simple enough, but some orthodontists (and TCs) don't want to seem pushy or like they're pressuring parents.

But if parents expressed enough interest to schedule and show up for the consult, it's only fitting that you gauge their intentions by asking them to choose your practice for their child's orthodontic care. If you've done a good job of making the case, they will most likely say yes. If they say they need more time, make sure to follow up them in a week. See the next point.

6. Failure to Follow Up With Uncommitted Parents

Ortho consults aren't the slam dunk they once were. More parents are willing to shop around for ortho care today than in the past. Saying yes to treatment that typically costs \$5,000 or more is taking longer for more and more parents. Many ortho practices fail to follow up with parents who say they need more time or need to think about it. There could be many reasons parents refrain from saying yes right away. You might be the first practice they are visiting. Parents may want to talk it over with their spouse (who didn't attend the consult). They may have other financial commitments they have to work through before making a decision.

As long as they don't say no, follow up with them within a week. See where they are in the decision-making process. Offer to hold a second consult with their spouse, if necessary. It could be a toss-up between your practice and another one. Your follow-up phone call could be the difference-maker in such a scenario.

7. Tolerating Poor Performance

Most people don't like confrontation. Yet, as the practice owner, you can't let an employee who consistently

underperforms get away with doing less than her co-workers. It's not fair to them or to you.

Everybody will occasionally make a mistake, but there are some employees who, for whatever reason, aren't fully contributing to the practice's success. If they're not held accountable, they will continue to underperform, causing dissension and resentment among the rest of the team.

You need to talk to employees in private. Review their recent performance issues. Be as specific as possible. Provide goals for them to improve, and give a time line. If they meet the objectives, great. If not, you will need to invoke further disciplinary measures. Once you have finished this initial meeting, document the conversation in the employee's personnel record.

Many people will up their game after such a conversation. Plus, the rest of your team will appreciate that you tackled this issue. If the employee fails to perform as expected, then follow through by instituting progressive disciplinary measures.

8. Overdue Debonds

You don't want to continue treating patients past their official end date. But that's what happens with overdue debonds. These patients got off track during the course of treatment by missing a couple of appointments. I've known orthodontists who had trouble fitting in new patients because their schedules were so clogged with overdue debonds.

If patients miss an appointment, get them back in the practice as soon as possible. You don't want patients going off schedule because that will eventually wreck your schedule.

Getting better as a practice owner means avoiding the big mistakes. Levin Group has worked with thousands of orthodontists over the years, and most of our new clients have made many of these mistakes, sometimes multiple times. By eliminating these missteps, you can improve practice performance immeasurably! ☺

About the Author



Dr. Roger P. Levin is Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Levin Group, Inc. Need help reaching your goals faster? Visit www.levingroup.com/consulting to see how our solutions can help accelerate your practice success.