Six rules that I have learned in my life as a dentist

By Richard J. Reinitz, DDS, MBA, FAGD

Rule #1: There is no substitute for education and experience
All dentists are created equal when we graduate. From there, the differentiating factor comes with advanced training, continuing education, and a willingness to continue to learn and experiment. The greatest lessons we learn come from our failures.

When I was in general practice residency at the Veterans Administration in Philadelphia, my mentor, Dr. Alan Samet, taught me a vital lesson. As I struggled with the patient who was impacted third molar—and ultimately had to be rescued by the senior resident—Dr. Samet watched in bemusement. After the patient was dismissed and I had been criticized by a senior resident for my mistakes, I sat slumped in front of Dr. Samet. He asked what I had learned. With absolute honesty, I told Dr. Samet that I now understood the valuable art of the referral!

The memory of my failures has made me a better dentist, one who is more humble and more aware of his limitations. Success is great but it is also a tonic. Success can make you believe that you can do things that you should not do. A little reality can go a long way.

Rule #2: It’s always about the money
When I was still in my prosthodontic residency, I began moonlighting with only an assistant and no front desk person. The office had large floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the parking lot. A nicely dressed new patient came to see me, and following a full series of X-rays and a complete examination, I presented her with my treatment plan. I believe the total for the treatment plan came to approximately $2,000. She had insurance, so the total would have been reduced by the insurance benefit. But after telling me the cost was prohibitive, she left the office.

Being the dentist as well as the front desk attendant, I watched as she entered her car, a top-of-the-line new Mercedes with the temporary license plate still visible. In seeing this, the message I received was that she did not value dentistry as highly as she did her mode of transportation.

I think each of us has probably experienced similar situations or has been presented with patients demanding that we treat them according to their maximum insurance benefits. Some dentists might contend that we have to make patients understand the value of good oral health. But the volume of what a patient hears is directly proportional to the position dentistry ranks in the patient’s value system.

Rule #5: You have to care
A family friend, who had a son who was to attend medical school, had a question. Given the choice between two physicians—one who was clearly a recognized leader in his field but with little or no ‘bedside manner,’ or one who was quite capable and possessed excellent bedside manner—this aspiring doctor wanted to know which physician my wife and I would prefer? Both of us said the second physician. My friend’s son was shocked at our answer and fully expected us to choose ‘the best.’ He asked why.

I wish I could tell you when I had my epiphany. But one day I realized that my team members had lives of their own. I have been fortunate to have had the privilege of hiring and being able to keep a team together for many years. The team members know their jobs and responsibilities—whether fault exists or not.

Rule #6: Let go
When I first went into private practice, I micromanaged everything, and became angry when a team member had to take time off for illness, a sick child, or any other reason. It was not that I was mean. I had large bills to pay, and when team members did not work, my job became more difficult. Ultimately, this situation affected daily production.

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Rule #5: Remember, it is a business
It would be nice to think of our practices in terms other than just money. But—quite simply—if our expenses outpace our revenues, we will not be calling ourselves anything except bankrupt. You should have an employee manual to address issues like job descriptions, expected work hours, and benefits. Keep a close eye on accounts receivable, and try not to over-commit to the latest must-have “toys.”

My final piece of advice is to find people with whom you share that worry and joy. If you think about it, when you build a warm and caring environment in your practice and at home, you will have a support system that allows you to succeed.

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