

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

The Rules of Improv

Orthodontic practice is rarely as predictable as the treatment plans we craft. A broken appliance, an unexpected staff absence, an upset patient—each day demands more than clinical expertise. It requires adaptability, timing, and, occasionally, a bit of theatrics. Interestingly, these same qualities are the essence of improvisational comedy. While improv may seem worlds apart from orthodontics, its four core principles map surprisingly well onto our specialty and offer unexpected insights into the challenges we navigate daily on the clinical stage.

The first rule of improv is “Yes, and ...”—a principle that encourages acceptance and forward momentum. Our first instinct is often to say “no,” denying what’s been presented, especially when we’re caught off guard. But “no” shuts down the scene and fractures connection. “Yes, and ...” means acknowledging the situation and building on it. Whether navigating a parent’s concern, a staff member’s suggestion, or a treatment complication, responding with openness keeps dialogue moving and solutions flowing.

The second rule of improv is “Make your partner look good.” If one performer fumbles a line, the others rally to keep the scene alive. In orthodontics, we do the same, lifting our team through supportive interactions. I’ve previously written about the power of praising a technician’s work in front of a parent, even when adjusting their bracket positioning or retying a wire correctly. By making others look good, we foster a culture of collaboration where communication flows freely and morale stays high.

The third rule of improv is “Be in the moment.” Success on stage comes from listening closely and responding with honesty. Orthodontics is no different. When tensions rise, whether from

colleagues, patients, or staff, our role isn’t to interrupt or redirect, but to lean in. People sense when we’re fully present. That presence builds trust, reveals what’s unspoken, and often defuses conflict. True excellence isn’t just clinical—it’s about showing up, moment by moment, with full attention.

The fourth rule of improv is “There are no mistakes, only opportunities.” In improv, a missed line can spark a better scene. In orthodontics, surprises often arise. We might discover a second molar impaction or unexpected dental protrusion months into treatment. What initially feels like a setback often reveals the true treatment need—perhaps shifting to premolar extractions to create sufficient arch space. The best clinicians, like the best improvisers, stay nimble and view the unexpected as opportunity.

A well-known example of breaking these rules occurred at The Second City with Joan Rivers. During a scene, her partner said, “What about our children?” and Rivers replied, “We don’t have any.” Her quick response got a laugh, but it violated the core principles of improv: she rejected the premise, undercut her partner, and stepped outside the moment to land a punchline. The laugh came at the expense of the scene’s integrity and the trust that makes good improv work.

As Robert Greene writes in *The Daily Laws*, “We are all actors in the theater of life.” Nowhere is that stage more visible than in our office. Our ability to quickly adapt in the moment—clinically, emotionally, or logistically—defines our success. While technical skill is essential, it’s the improvisation in between that makes a patient’s journey feel seamless. In the end, it’s how we respond in those unscripted moments that makes for a truly masterful orthodontic performance.

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