

Developing Respectful Relationships in Today's Health Care Work Environment

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Respect is a virtue of honoring someone, such as, your elders, your teachers, your peers, your supervisors, and your colleagues and/or fellow members of the health care team. The word respect means showing the attitude of friendliness and comfort to people to give them a sense of ease when you are with them. Respect is the essence of nursing (Allan et al., 2008). Respect is an integral part of how nurses treat patients, peers and self. Respect is a behavior and an act. We choose how we behave and make cognitive decisions every day of our lives about how to treat others.

A sense of respect is a key element that nurses seek in the work place and a feeling of being connected to others. Respect is the foundation of all good relationships, including those you have with your colleagues. Feeling disrespected is one reason nurses leave employers. This article provides an overview of strategies and steps that you and employers can take to ensure that nurses and their fellow workers feel respected.

Deemed disrespectful

There are many actions that may offend your co-workers. For example, talking or gossiping about co-workers is one way you may be disrespectful. This behavior causes distrust and can have a trickle-down effect. Asking someone to lie for you or blaming someone else for mistakes you made is offensive, and lacking in professionalism and respect for your fellow nurses and essentially yourself. Taking credit for someone else's work and not pulling your own weight on the job can cause ill-will and shows a lack of respect. Complaining about your organization, supervisors or managers, and co-workers, can also, be deemed as a lack of respect, along with having a condescending attitude toward others.

Other behaviors may seem trivial, but still can be perceived as disrespectful. For example, telling offensive

jokes, showing up late for meetings and work, neglecting to say "please" and "thank you", and sending negative email that criticize another's actions (McKay, 2008; Warnock, 2008) demonstrate a lack of respect. Regardless of the intent, disrespect is subjective in nature and any action may be considered disrespectful. Becoming aware of others' perceptions of your actions is important in avoiding any appearance of lack of respect.



One way to communicate that a colleague or co-worker is being disrespectful is to be direct and broach the subject in a very calm, mature, non-aggressive tone. Be brief, but give examples of the behavior. Because the person is someone that you want to maintain an affable relationship with, be sure to be constructive and convey to them positive characteristics of their personality as well, but do not make excuses for the bad behavior. If they become upset, stay calm and kind, but do not back down. Just end the conversation with a comment letting them know that you are sorry that they are upset. Also, tell them that you knew that the right thing to do

was let them know that their behavior was a big concern for you and that it needed to be addressed, so that you can be comfortable with them.

Why is it important to be respectful?

Your relationship with your colleagues is important. Good workplace relationships can help you do a better job. They can make going to work more enjoyable (McKay, 2008, p.2). When your work environment is respectful, trusting, and flexible; it improves morale. Nurses are empowered when moral concepts are based on honesty, trust, respect, and loyalty (Miller, 2006).

These factors affect how we care for our patients and can affect outcomes in a positive or negative manner. The main reason to be professional, respectful, and collaborative is to promote patient safety. Health care is delivered by

teams of professionals who need to communicate well, respecting the principles of honesty, respect for others, confidentiality, and responsibility for their actions (Warnock, 2008, p.1). Essential elements to professional care and include: 1) affection or a positive regard to achieve the well-being of clients being cared for, 2) cognition or having knowledge of what is essential to achieve well-being, 3) volition or commitment to use one's knowledge in the best interest of clients, 4) imagination or the capacity to share life experiences, 5) motivation or the disposition to place the interest of clients and others before your own, and 6) expressing action verbally and nonverbally to convey care. These conditions are supported by nursing virtues of respect, compassion, intellectual honesty, accountability, empathy, altruism, and caring. These support the primacy of caring in the nursing profession (Miller, 2006, p. 2).

In health care organizations, where each employee is perceived by the public either as an emissary of goodwill or a hostile example of poor service quality, the attitude displayed by nurses is essential to encourage satisfaction with the entire patient care experience. Certain types of behavior are clearly unacceptable and each prospective employee should be properly oriented prior to being hired (Warnock, 2008). Many health authorities and hospitals have respectful workplace policies or standards of performance that each employee is expected to comply with. Codes of professionalism are helpful guidelines that provide a mechanism for those that seek conflict resolution. This may help to regulate or disseminate bad behaviors and disrespect as well.

Consequences of disrespect are poor teamwork, poor work environment, decreased productivity, lack of cohesiveness, and poor morale (Warnock, 2008; Allan et al., 2008; Veninga, 2003). Bad relationships with co-workers can distract you and turn an "okay job" into a dreadful ordeal. Dissatisfaction among nurses is related to emotional strain, poor work group collaboration, and concern that patient needs are not being met (Miller, 2006). In a 2001 study of 43,329 nurses at 711 hospitals more than forty-three percent of them scored high on a survey measuring emotional exhaustion (Veninga, 2003). Disrespect contributes to emotional exhaustion and dissatisfaction. New nurses are more likely to stay in their current positions if they are satisfied with their work environment: co-

workers, interaction, professional opportunities and recognition (Miller, 2006).

Many nurses do not stay, however, leading to increased turnover, which is costly to the organization. When nurses leave, new ones must be hired and trained. Employers lose good, experienced nurses. Co-workers have to get used to working with new people and carrying the load until new nurses are found and trained which affects workload and continuity of patient care.

WE MUST SET A GOAL TO TREAT EVERYONE WITH RESPECT REGARDLESS OF THEIR LEVEL ON THE ORGANIZATIONAL CHART.

Respect begins with me

How can we assure a culture of respect in complex and demanding health care work environments? As nurses, we must internalize the need

for respect and make it a part of who we are. We must set a goal to treat everyone with respect regardless of their level on the organizational chart. Respect and self-respect are deeply connected. It is impossible to respect ourselves without respecting others and to respect others without respecting ourselves (Stanford University, 2003).

It is important to practice civility by being polite and minding your socialization skills. Greeting co-workers with "hello" and saying "goodbye" lets them know that we consider them as a part of the team. It is important to say, "thank you" when someone helps you and "please" when you ask for something or need something. Look at your fellow nurses in the eyes when speaking to them. This lets them know that the conversation is important to you and that you will listen. Remember, simple things mean a lot and being respectful in small ways goes a great distance in building therapeutic relationships. Get to know your co-workers, as many as possible, before making particular friends. This helps you become better acquainted and helps others get to know you (Stewart & Lawrence, 1999).

Work diligently and effectively being thoughtful of other's needs. When delegating, only ask others to perform tasks that are part of their job description. Allow fellow nurses or aides enough time to properly perform the task and give proper, clear instruction. Work hard and work as hard as you expect others to. Co-workers will work harder and even give extra effort if they know that you make the same effort. Take responsibility for your own successes and failures or faults. Don't claim others' hard work and diligence as your own. Make sure you provide them credit for their success (Stewart & Lawrence, 1999; Alexander, n.d.).

In addition, avoid gossiping and controversial topics. You and your co-workers, alike, know what topics are appropriate and what is not. Avoid telling inappropriate jokes, workplace politics, and stay away from fellow workers that cause trouble. Guard your reputation by doing the best job possible without taking questionable shortcuts. Stay away from potentially explosive situations. Submit yourself to authority by doing the best job to your ability and if your manager is difficult to deal with, approach them in the same manner that was mentioned earlier. Convey your feelings about their disrespectful behavior in a calm, professional manner and request a reprieve. In some situations, it may be necessary to elicit a facilitator, someone that is totally unbiased and that is not a stakeholder in your organization or on your particular unit to mediate such meetings. A facilitator's role is to help you come to a consensus and determine what future action needs to be taken. It is important to follow the appropriate chain of command, and if you do not obtain resolution with your manager, it may be necessary to move to the next level. The overall goal is to produce a working relationship that promotes a respectful, safe working environment for staff and patients.

Finally, be worthy of your co-workers respect. First, do your job. Don't abuse privileges. You have to work hard to earn and keep respect. If getting along with others is essential to job performance, go above and beyond to find ways to do a little more. Offer to help other nurses that may feel overwhelmed. You will be remembered as the one who stays cool in times of stress. Getting along with others is important in any job, especially nursing with all of its complexities. Many top companies report that the ability to be a team player and get along with others is one of the three top qualities sought in new hires (Alexander, n.d., p. 4).

Nurse leaders' responsibility

Nursing leaders are responsible for ensuring respectful work environments. Managers need to lead by example and set the mark for employee behavior. The qualities of individuals that serve as positive role models and leaders in nursing are compassion, flexibility, willingness to listen, loving, empathetic, energetic, spirited, wise, respectful of others, professional, innovative, empowering, caring, and attentive (Miller, 2006, p. 477).

Being honest with staff helps to build respect. Let nurses know about plans and policies that affect their jobs. Get them involved in formulating these plans and policies (Veninga, 2003). Look for strengths in your employees, expect the best, and assist them to improve. Build confidence in your staffs' abilities. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

stated, "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being." This builds respect and self-respect.

Make your expectations clear. Provide clear performance standards, orientation, and essential tools for training. When performance standards are fair, yet firm success is encouraged. Successful health care supervisors acknowledge, accept, and understand an employee's need to be respected as an individual and recognized for work contributions (Lieberman & Lieberman, 1997, p. 3). Be supportive of your staff and be a facilitator, instead of a judge or a nitpicker. Be consistent, fair, and impartial. Show your value for each and every employee regardless of their level within the organization (Umiker, 1995; Lieberman & Lieberman, 1997). One way to instill a sense of value in each employee is to actively involve and illicit input in areas where change is needed or for quality improvement purposes from representatives from every area that your unit or facility encompasses. Individuals may be included from housekeeping, volunteer services, transport teams, CNAs, nurses, physicians, ward secretaries, maintenance crew members, and any other groups of stakeholders that actively contribute to organizational or unit specific workflow. Another way to facilitate a sense of individual value is to develop committees with diverse membership that addresses specific concerns in your facility or unit. One committee might address the issue of workplace respect and therapeutic working relationships.

When leaders are passionate about their jobs, respect is generated. Be passionate about your organization and its priorities. This inspires employees (Veninga, 2003). Be enthusiastic, even when problems arise and work toward conflict resolution. Leaders need to assist employees by acting as a facilitator of solutions that are constructive and wise (Lieberman & Lieberman, 1997).

It is important to build a sense of community within your unit. Community is very important to nurses. Nurses desire a sense of respect and belonging or being connected to their workplace. One important reason nurses leave is because they do not feel like they belong or feel a sense of community. Ways to build a sense of community include showing kindness and genuine concern, expressing appreciation, and celebrating meaningful events together. Health care managers and leaders must spend time with their employees, give encouragement, and remind them of the importance of their work (Veninga, 2003, pg 6). These are the things that pull your employees together and bind them as a team, showing them the importance of working together to meet specific unit and

organizational goals. According to Yate, "All this requires that we listen as we have not listened before, give credit where credit is due, and offer our employees the same respect and fairness we tell them they owe customers (Yate, 1991, p. 34).

Handling disrespect and conflict

When you feel that a co-worker is not respecting you, develop polite ways to express your views. You can say, "I am interested in hearing more of your criticism, but I would appreciate it if you made it less personal". You may say, "Please don't say things like that when I'm around; it makes me uncomfortable." Be patient and put forth your best effort. Practice smiling, speaking less, and listening more.

If disrespect continues or if an issue arises because of lack of respect you have experienced from a fellow nurse, try to work it out with that person first. Speak directly to that person. Be private and discreet. Take serious problems to your manager or supervisor. Try to work things out by offering solutions or suggestions. Don't have the expectation or ask, "What are you going to do about it?" Instead, take an active role in working the problem out. If justifiable, accept constructive criticism with poise. Be slow to react to statements made by others. Remember, reaction is immediate and emotional. You are more likely to say something that you will regret later. A response is well-controlled, thought through, and given consideration (McKay, 2008).

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