



ASPAN

American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses

Message from the President

The Hostile Work Environment: Speak Out – Be the Voice

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Nurses generally work in a team environment where collegial workplace relationships require civil and effective communication between coworkers. Yet, our work environment is said to contain some questionable nurse-on-nurse behaviors. As nurses, do we see ourselves as positive team players, partners and collaborators – or as competitors?

I have had the opportunity in the last few issues of *Breathline* to ask and encourage you to speak up and advocate for issues that affect patient safety and our professional practice. Advocacy involves not only acknowledging a position of responsibility and heeding the call to action, but also harnessing one's internal power to take action and make a difference.

A Workplace Paradox

Nurses often exhibit great patience and caring behaviors when dealing with healthcare consumers. Our formal scientific education and skill set empowers us to perform as competent professionals. We work hard to deliver excellent care, and feel a sense of pride and accomplishment when we deliver our best effort for our patients. Unfortunately, it is well documented that nurses experience unsupportive and hostile actions from their colleagues.¹

Lateral violence and horizontal hostility are terms assigned to describe behaviors of aggression in the nursing workplace. Such aggression can be physical, verbal, emotional, psychological or sexual and results in the nurse feeling abused, threatened or assaulted in her or his work environment.²

You may recognize these behaviors as non-verbal innuendo, verbal affront, undermining activity, withholding information, sabotage, infighting, scapegoating, broken confidences or actual physical violence.¹ While the definition and manifestation of workplace violence varies, all of these behaviors are detrimental to the health and well being of nurses and the profession.

Many times, and perhaps most times, it is easier for nurses to speak up in defense of patients rather than ourselves. Frequently, as victims or witnesses of non-caring or hostile behaviors perpetrated in the workplace, nurses remain silent and do not speak out in defense of self or a colleague. In fact, many new graduate nurses are leaving the profession soon after beginning their first job, often because they do not feel supported or accepted by their peers.¹ These phenomena provoke some important questions.

Is your unit environment one that values each individual, or is the climate one of conflict and “eating our young?” Do you feel confident and supported when negative or unpleasant peer behaviors occur in the workplace? Are we nurses continuing to support destructive behaviors and negative patterns from the past that detract from our focus on patient care? Or are we instead committed to work at fostering positive relationships and a healthy, non-hostile work environment?

Nursing Culture

Significant factors are changing the dynamics of our workplace. The growing nursing shortage is real and will influence every aspect of our healthcare system – ultimately impacting the quality of care that nurses can give and patients receive. The aging nurse workforce, with the average age of a nurse now at forty-six, will cause many baby boomers to retire from the profession over the next decade.

As individuals and nursing leaders we must strive to promote healthy work environments that encourage recruitment and retention of a nursing workforce. Just a few years ago, the idea of orienting and training graduate nurses directly into the perianesthesia environment was not accepted. Now, we are seeing creative, innovative programs that foster and support new graduates.

Nurses have the right to a work in a safe environment for themselves and their patients.³ When dealing with the culture of nursing, it is essential that we nurses hold ourselves and our colleagues accountable for the ways in which we communicate and speak out regarding actions that create a hostile work environment. Each nurse must take a stand when witnessing negative, demoralizing and unsafe behavior or conditions. Do not tolerate it; speak out against it! We must place an emphasis on teamwork, communication and effective leadership.

Evaluate your unit culture. Does the work team uphold and foster a caring, healing environment where all nurses are valued and supported while emphasizing accountability for individual actions? Our practice focuses on the provision of quality patient care, which is ultimately reliant on collegial relationships built in trust, respect, healthy communication patterns, and personal and professional growth.

Healing Hostility

Healthcare organizations and nurses have a responsibility to recognize, prevent and intervene in cases of workplace hostility. Nurses must break from the acculturated, negative behaviors we sometimes experience when working together. Situations involving disrespect, questionable work ethics, broken rules and lack of support require a strong voice to hold the responsible individual(s) accountable. Zero tolerance policies should be implemented to support a hostile free work environment.

Nurses also need to increase their knowledge and understanding of the issues surrounding workplace hostility. Just as clinical skills are learned and developed, we must learn and develop conflict management strategies to assist us in the identification, intervention and prevention of workplace negativity and hostility. "Integrating collaborative conflict management strategies into the daily activities of clinical care can improve patient outcomes, improve retention of nursing staff, and create an environment that optimizes scientific advances through enhancement of effective working relationships."⁴ This is the next evolution of healthcare delivery.

It is essential that nurses guide and support each other to change destructive thoughts and behaviors. This requires a proactive stand and a mindset of appreciation and respect for our colleagues and the work that we do. As you return to your workplace in the role of active change agent, speak with your supervisors and colleagues about fostering that positive, supportive work environment. Suggest that classes be given or reading material be provided to address dealing with conflict and creating positive environments.

Every nurse has the power to eradicate hostile work environments. While acknowledging that we all, at times, feel conflicted in some situations, know that constructive methods and behaviors can be adopted to prevent workplace situations from becoming antagonistic. Speak up for positive change! "Be the Voice" for yourself and your colleagues.

REFERENCES

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