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The Power of Positive Nursing

By: Susanne Gaddis, PhD

More so than other professionals, nurses intimately understand the communicable characteristics of a potentially contagious virus. And much like any transmittable organism, communications have the ability to infect or heal: With every word and action you are either positively affecting or negatively infecting your work environment. Your inner perceptions and attitude strongly impacts your outward attitude, and vice-versa. And while administrative personnel can and should take a key role in creating ways to reward and retain staff, individual practitioners should take an active role in positively affecting – and not infecting – their own professional work space.

In other words, don't become a "professional victim." Instead, chose to be a "professional victor." Care how your words impact those around you. Realize that constructive and encouraging communication is contagious – directly inoculating the work atmosphere with a productive and cheerful character.

"Nursing is science, math and high-tech, all coupled together with the art of care. It's challenging both mentally and physically. Nurses want to use all of their incredible knowledge and help patients. They need to constantly remind themselves that their industry experience and expertise helps to facilitate and reach healing for the patient," said Jeffrey Albaugh, MS, APRN, CUCNS, a clinical nurse specialist who has written a series of published articles on the current national nursing shortage (to reach epidemic proportions in 2010) and how to keep nurses in nursing, "Nurses need to be a part of the solution."

“Us” versus “Them” – The “big picture” of the macro-culture

In any health care organization there exists several environs: macro-cultures, mini-cultures and micro-cultures. Starting at the largest segment and drilling down into smaller, more niche, segments – a macro-culture is the “big picture,” an organization’s “overall” culture. In other words, it’s the set of behaviors that are accepted and supported in an encompassing social environment, such as a hospital.

Five key elements to success in functioning within a macro-culture environ are:

- Strong Leadership – Every well-oiled macro-culture has a steadfast “worker’s advocate” who “goes to bat” for the front-line team.
- Common Mission – There’s a set of shared, documented and communicated standards published via consistent channels of communication.
- Open Lines of Communication – Everyone needs to feel respected, feel like they’re being heard.
- Formal Recognition Process – The reward and recognition of experience and expertise can be in the form of positive feedback, an award or a monetary gift.
- Documented and Benchmarked Patient Care & Employee Satisfaction Feedback – There needs to be a benchmarking and response process so certain positive/negative behaviors and issues can be immediately addressed in a timely manner.

As for nurses dealing with “big-picture,” hospital : “We need to stop complaining and take positive action – Stop looking at administration as ‘they.’ We have to work on the same team for the good of the patient,” Albaugh stated, “The ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality has to change. When I’m intimately involved in the process, that cycle breaks down.”

A noted professor of organization psychology and a certified “authentic happiness coach,” Michael McCormick, PhD, studies the psychology and dynamics of teamwork and group interaction on human happiness. McCormick offers that there are three critical keys nurses can use to unlock a more positive working environment in their high-stress field: Firstly, nurses have a right and responsibility to take care of themselves. Nurses want to feel good about their job and that they are making a positive difference in someone’s life. When nurses focus on what

they don't do well," McCormick, says "this can lead to transitory anxiety and depression. The use of applied positive psychology is a form of preventative psychological medicine."

Secondly, nurses must realize that they have the power to own who they are, claim who they are and what they can do, said McCormick. And thirdly, nurses should mentor new nurses and take care of each other so they can create a social support network that fosters a positive psychological environment. "Nurses need to realize that every time they 'eat their young' they lose their numbers," he said, "It's actually transferred aggression – they transfer onto others how they've been treated by others, such as doctors or administrators."

Mini-culture teaming

Within the greater macro-culture exist numerous mini-cultures, such as diverse teams made up of individuals. This translates into the socially accepted and supported behaviors that differ from, for example, the night shift to the day shift, from hospital administrators to the hospital staff, from RNs to physicians, and so on.

Solid and pre-planned teamwork is essential to the success of any group effort, explained Professor McCormick. "I use the analogy of the Wizard of Oz. Dorothy drops into Oz as an individual, but then she adds the scarecrow, the lion and the tin man. They start out as individuals, but as the movie progresses they begin to work as a team," he noted.

Five key elements to success operating effectively in a macro-culture environ are:

- Relationships Before Tasks – Don't jump straight into a newly formed group project without first attending to group dynamics.
- Make a Plan – Decide from the outset of any group task how the group will work together. There's great comfort in action and "diving right in" to the task at hand. Yet, superior alternate plans and new ideas may be lost in the fray for singularly task- and goal-oriented groups. Great group concepts and working environments come with time, patience and planning. All help provide a continuity of care, benefiting both patients and staff.

- Create a More Positive Dialogue – Each person can reduce workplace tension and stress by complaining 10% less and encouraging 10% more.
- Become a Better Mentor – Helping educate newcomers and sharing your valuable expertise and knowledge lightens everyone’s workload.
- Do a Positive Check-Out – After every completed task, stop and think how you could have improved your performance as a group. What worked? What didn’t work? What would you do differently next time?

Micro-culture make-up

And finally, the smallest microcosm of behavior is the micro-culture. The micro-culture, which is defined as an individual, also abides by a set of specified rules governing behavior.

Five key elements to success in a micro-culture environ are:

- Set Positive Expectations – Expect to have a great day. A great shift. There will be days that are more stressful than others. By keeping a positive perspective and looking at doing the best you can with each presenting situation, you will get through any challenge.
- Ask for Help When You Need It – There’s no shame in asking someone for assistance when you can’t handle something; there is shame, though, in haphazardly bungling something you can’t or aren’t qualified to manage.
- Celebrate Small Successes – Allow yourself to celebrate the fact that the “fax machine works today” or “the patient in #206 said I was a great nurse.”
- Recognize & Reward Others for Their Contributions – Everyone enjoys a well-deserved pat on the back. You give one, you get one.
- Be Your Own Cheerleader – Create a more positive inner-dialogue with yourself: “I’m a well-qualified nurse.” “I really loved helping people today.” Hooray – Go You!

“Push back” to avert harm

Oftentimes, when it comes to respect, nurses feel like they’re sucking on the “stick end” of the healthcare professional’s lollipop.

To that purpose, Professor McCormick wishes that nurses would embrace a more proactive stance in claiming their power – a posture referred to as “push back.” Simply put, when nurses

feel that an incorrect diagnosis, treatment or medication is being assigned, they should speak up. “It’s a self-confidence issue,” the professor noted, “Think of the tragic Columbia incident, where the engineers wouldn’t speak up to their superiors. They could have prevented a tragedy by pushing back.” Organizations value people who “push back” when they recognize that something is about to happen that will cause harm, he noted.

As a practicing nurse, Albaugh also sees the need of nurses to feel respected as a key empowerment initiative. “It’s a respect on both sides: I work *with* the physicians, not *for* them,” he noted, “We are a profession in and of itself. It’s all about the tone and the approach you take.”

One patient at a time

In the end, perhaps Albaugh most eloquently summarized the potent power that exists in the noble profession of nursing: “As nurses, we’re an incredibly powerful body and can do many things to give the high-quality care that we went to school for and strive for,” said Albaugh, “There are a lot of reasons nurses are unhappy today, but there’s a lot of things we can do to change things now. We should never lose sight that it’s an honor and a privilege to be a nurse. Each and every interaction has the possibility to transform the patient and ourselves in a positive way. We change the world one patient at a time.”

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. With a specialized expertise in healthcare communication, Susanne delivers workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations across the United States. For more information, or to book Dr. Gaddis for an upcoming conference or event call 919-933-3237 or visit: www.communicationsdoctor.com.