

A kinder, gentler workplace

Others may not notice your courtesy, but they will notice your rudeness.

By Leah Curtin, RN, ScD(h), FAAN



EVERYTHING has changed over the years. Technology, populations, human behavior, even bacteria and viruses have changed, but time hasn't changed at all. Time simply marches on one moment at a time until we finally run out of moments.

I may be too simplistic, and most assuredly I'm old-fashioned, but it seems to me that restoring courtesy as a cultural norm might help improve our workplaces. Courtesy takes time—to listen and to hear what is said. We don't even take the time to say “please” and “thank you” anymore. We're very busy, and our work is occasionally very urgent, and that urgency is used to excuse rudeness and impatience.

And because our work often is urgent and important, we almost believe we have a duty to bully those who are less proficient. Yet, by and large, being bullied makes a person less competent, and errors increase rather than decrease with discourtesy. So, perhaps it's no wonder that a 2016 study published in the *British Medical Journal* found that lethal medical errors in the United States have risen from about 100,000 in 2000 to over 250,000 today.

When did it become acceptable to treat your professional colleagues, coworkers, and even patients with less attention than we give to beeps on our smartphones? Why is it acceptable to talk on the phone (or text or tweet) rather than pay attention to the people in your personal presence? I know generations differ, but presence is still presence, listening is still listening, kindness is still kindness, and respect is still respect.

We could begin to make our own workplace a kinder, gentler, and safer place if we listen to what others are saying to us. I remember a comedian who joked that the old-fashioned call-waiting ought to be called “call rude” because it automatically interrupted a conversation. The person to whom you were speaking puts you

on hold while he or she speaks to another person. Today, we have call-waiting on steroids. It's the beeping, ringing, texting, tweeting, and ringing smartphone.

If you must take a live communication device into a meeting with patients and families (or anyone else for that matter), put it on vibrate and explain why your attention may be called away from them. And never, ever check your emails or visit Facebook when you're in the presence of others who are trying to interact with you. When you allow a

device to take claim of your attention, what you're telling the people in the room, without words, is that whoever or whatever the phone is communicating is more important than they are. People resent our addiction to our most recent moral-free, soul-free wireless *deus ex machina*.

Courtesy is simply behavior designed to avoid hurting other people's feelings in order to salve our own egos. It costs nothing. It takes no more time and it may even save time. Being polite means being aware of and respecting the feelings of other people, who may not always notice courtesy but always notice rudeness. Good manners change how others react to you, and to the organization you represent. It is only one small step toward de-escalating violence in the workplace, but it's a step in the right direction. It will make life so much more pleasant and, incidentally, our workplaces so much safer for patients.

Leah Curtin, RN, ScD(h), FAAN
Executive Editor, Professional Outreach
American Nurse Today

Selected references

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