



Attitude adds to a toxic work environment

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

RICHARD ALDINGTON, a well-known British writer, poet, and reviewer, insisted that the best review he ever wrote wasn't published. He explained, "In the early days of Dada [the predecessor of surrealism], I received for review a book which contained the following poem:

A B C D E F
G H I J K L
M N O P Q R
S T U V W X
Y Z

"On which I commented:

1 2 3 4 5
6 7 8 9 10

"The *Times* refused to print it."

Both Aldington and the poet had *attitude*—in a fun sort of way. Today, though, attitude is anything but fun. It's nothing more or less than selfishness coupled with self-centeredness. Once the province of a few eccentric avant-garde individuals, attitude entered the mainstream in the 1980s with punk rockers. Today, it's apparent at every social level.

To a greater or lesser degree, attitude is defined largely by one's generation. Hospitals today have multigenerational workforces, and the various age-groups express their frustration loudly. Millennials ask for balance and flexibility. Baby Boomers are vexed by Generation Y and their tether to technology. Generation X is eager for feedback about their work and also quick to criticize others.

The Great Recession has added angst to the mix. In 2014, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University released a whitepaper titled "Unhappy, Worried and Pessimistic: Americans in the Aftermath of the Great Recession." The title alone suggests the attitudes of those who've lived through it. Even nurses who generally are shielded from recession were affected—to the point that even today some are delaying retirement as they try to earn back some of what they've lost since 2008. Many will tell you they will have to work until they die.

Today, attitude has become a way of life—almost a way of being. Incivility is rampant in the workplace. Colleagues multitask on computers and smartphones during meetings—or worse, during conversations with others. People turn a cold shoulder or even roll their eyes when someone expresses an opinion they disagree with. Crude language (verbal as well as body language) adds pain and no help to any situation.

Christine Porath, associate professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business, reports that half of the North American workers she surveyed in 2011 said they were treated rudely at least once a week, up from one-quarter in 1998. Such workplace hostility is all the more insidious because it has become so common that it's accepted as normal.

In my opinion, most workplace hostility and violence don't come from patients and their families (although this is a real concern), but from coworkers. It's insulting and demeaning. We owe one another more than this. We owe our team more than this, regardless of a team member's generation. And we owe our patients a far safer environment than this.

Everyone benefits from a respectful work environment. Perhaps prolonged education, huge student debt, impending penurious retirement, and socially sanctioned selfishness have combined with anxiety to create this toxic environment. Perhaps not. But as healthcare professionals, as healers, we need to make every effort to combat negative, hurtful, counterproductive, self-centered attitudes.

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