WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be a professional? Providing care of the highest technical quality, of course. But professionalism also includes communicating clearly, being self-reflective, and consistently modeling responsibility, respect, and advocacy. Professionalism for nurses has always meant healing the sick, nurturing the wounded, placing patients first, providing holistic care, and educating new professionals. These qualities are reinforced in statements of nursing ethics and conduct. But behaviors that undermine a culture of safety persist.

This article is the first in a series that describes strategies nurses and other healthcare team members can use to address unprofessional behavior and promote accountability.

Building a professionalism infrastructure
A supportive plan helps healthcare professionals and their organizations successfully address behavior and performance that undermines their culture of safety. (See Questions for reflection.) Health care is inherently stressful, and anyone can suffer an occasional slip or lapse. But during your career, you’ve probably encountered a few team members who seem to model patterns of unprofessional or unsafe behavior. (See I just heard something that worries me.)

Clinicians need a fair, measured
approach for reporting and responding to occasional slips, preventing the development of harmful patterns, and addressing persistent patterns when they emerge. Three major elements help establish a robust, effective infrastructure:

- management, leadership, and peer commitment
- a goal-driven, fair model and process to guide graduated interventions
- multilevel, systemwide professional training in intervention-related communication skills.

Communication skills training is important, but those conducting interventions will lack essential support without an associated infrastructure, genuine leadership commitment, and meaningful data.

**Leadership commitment**

Managers and leaders have responsibility for knowing and pursuing their organization’s vision, mission, and goals. To be successful, leadership responsibilities include holding all team members accountable for modeling professional behaviors, routinely enforcing the group’s code of conduct equitably regardless of seniority or status, and taking timely action designed to address behaviors or performance that undermine a culture of safety.

**Graduated intervention model**

In addition to leadership, organizations need policies, resources, and surveillance tools to identify both single events and emerging patterns that are inconsistent with the organization’s mission, values, and goals. To reduce the likelihood a pattern will emerge, your organization should consistently address single events. Then, when a pattern appears or persists, leaders must design and hold clinicians accountable for action plans intended to improve performance.

We advocate a tiered intervention model. (See *Promoting Professionalism Pyramid.* The interventions associated with this model are summarized below. Note that the pyramid’s base reflects the fact that most healthcare team members consistently perform as professionals and simply need occasional recognition for work well done.

**Honing intervention skills**

In a healthcare culture that embodies professionalism, clinicians willingly share concerns. They understand the need to act respectfully and that failure to act only is noticed by patients, families, peers, and other team members, but also can threaten trust. However, you may encounter barriers to action. Overcoming those barriers requires consistently implementing a proven process and the skills for providing feedback.

The pyramid’s first intervention level suggests that when what appears to be a single slip or lapse occurs, all that may be needed is an informal conversation between peers, what we call *Cup of Coffee* conversations. In our view, single incidents generally do not require investigation, which may provoke disputes, fail to identify the truth, and delay sharing. However, single incidents involving allegations of serious conduct (for example, violations of law or organizational policy, such as practicing under the influence, impairment, and inappropriate touch) do mandate leadership-level investigation and management.

The pyramid model illustrates...
Promoting Professionalism Pyramid

Use the pyramid model as a guide for conducting appropriate, situation-specific interventions.

Vast majority of professionals — no issues — provide feedback, recognition


the reality that most clinicians, given such feedback, will change behavior. In the rare cases where a pattern of unprofessional behavior emerges, a peer messenger or manager who’s authorized to have access to the data demonstrating a pattern and has had intervention skills training performs an Awareness intervention. The messenger talks to the clinician about the data that suggests a pattern of unprofessional behavior, assuring him or her that the information is confidential. Consistent with professional self-regulation, no recommendations are offered other than to ask the clinician to review the data, consider what might prevent recurrences, and explain that follow-up will be provided. Awareness messages are effective in 75% to 80% of cases in our work with physicians and advanced practice professionals.

If the pattern persists, the clinician’s manager, supervisor, or other authority figure in the organization’s chain of command shares the findings with the clinician and implements an agreed-upon plan to reduce and eliminate recurrences in a Guided Intervention Under Authority. If the pattern remains unchanged despite these efforts, managers and leaders may need to invoke and scrupulously follow the organization’s Disciplinary procedures.

More to come

Appropriate interventions thoughtfully communicated can help maintain professionalism in health care, benefiting the healthcare team and patients. In upcoming articles, we’ll describe the skills required for Cup of Coffee, Awareness, and Guided Intervention Under Authority conversations (interventions) associated with each level of the Promoting Professionalism Pyramid.

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Selected references


