

What's Empathy got to do with it? Why Maintaining an Empathic Approach in your Collegial Relationships is one of the Vital Signs of Good Work Habits



Being a good nurse has a lot to do with empathy: a no-brainer, right? However, the need for empathy extends beyond patient care into other relationships, including the patient's family members and your colleagues as well. Here is a four-step method to help you develop an empathic approach toward those you work with everyday, your medical team. Here are some steps for developing an empathic approach:

Step 1: Put yourself in another person's shoes as a way to cultivate understanding:

The first step is to reflect and consider why someone may be engaged in behaviors that are unproductive and off-putting to others.

Start with a neutral attitude and begin asking some questions to help you better understand what might be going on. Examples of questions to ask include:

- a. Was this person trained properly?
- b. Is he or she fearful of making a mistake?
- c. Is intimidation from other team members a factor in their performance?
- d. Is there a language or cultural barrier?
- e. Identify other obstacles that may interfere with behavior or performance.

Step 2: Observation

Observation is a big part of your role as a nurse. You regularly observe your patient's health as part of your role. You are expected to not only look for clinical changes in a patient's health status, but you are also expected to observe mood and behavioral changes that have occurred and then find out why they occurred. Likewise, it is useful to observe your colleagues instead of judging or isolating them. It is more beneficial to do some observation, and then reflect on what they do well and where they struggle.

- a. First, observe what your colleague does well. When a team member is branded as lazy, stupid, bad, etc., the branding can be so global that the label of "unfit" dwarfs any good qualities or strengths the person may possess. Unfortunately, labels stunt our power to observe objectively.
- b. Second, observe the areas that present the greatest challenge: is it in the area of communication, teamwork or performing a specific task?

Your thoughtful observations can help you develop a strategy for connecting with your colleague that may produce some different results.

Step 3: Relationship building

In order to work together, it is important to develop some sort of relationship. This person may not initially be 'your cup of tea' and that is OK. Your job is to start finding some ways you can connect and relate to each other. Making that effort may actually help you appreciate who this person is with the added bonus of building some of that good, old empathy in the process. When you begin to know really know someone, it makes him or her less of a caricature and more of a complex human being.

Comment on what that person does well and be open to learning something new. This could be a great morale booster and open the door for the other person to receive some help or guidance from you.

Step 4: Strategic approach

Through observation and discussions with your co-worker, you can begin to develop a new, productive approach that is tailored to your colleague's strengths. Over time, multiple benefits may result from your efforts: better teamwork and improved care of patients. Perhaps, the person who was branded as "useless" can be eventually be regarded as someone with value.

If your observation and discussions with your colleague determine that a specific intervention is required beyond what you and others on the team can deliver (such as in-depth training), share your assessment with your manager.

The benefits of implementing an empathic approach are considerable: less harmful gossip and a conscious effort to work with all team members, no matter their shortcomings.

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