

3 What You Say and Say What You Mean

In annual surveys, the public puts healthcare professionals on a pedestal by *consistently* rating them highest when it comes to honesty and ethics. If you are familiar with this statistic, it may have influenced your decision to pursue a career in healthcare.

So, how is it that all of us honest, ethical people became so entrenched in a culture of incivility? Is it possible that we have lost sight of our own values and beliefs? And if so, how do we get them back? We get civility back by cultivating personal and professional integrity.

What Does It Mean to Have Integrity?

Integrity can be a difficult concept to pin down. Most people think of it as honesty—or being able to tell the truth—but it's a little deeper than that.

The dictionary defines integrity as "adherence to moral and ethical principles." That strict definition paints a picture of people with integrity as "goodie two-shoes" who do everything perfectly—and that's just not true.



Here's an easier way to understand integrity: Integrity is when your *values* match your *behaviors*. It's just that simple. (Well, it's not always simple to do...but it *is* simple to understand!)

Here are a few examples:

- If you *value* promptness, the parallel *behavior* will be that you arrive at work on time (or even early) every single day.
- If you *value* honesty, your matching *behavior* will be to tell the truth in every situation.

- If you *value* being a kind and compassionate caregiver, a corresponding *behavior* would be to spend more time making sure every patient is satisfied and comfortable.

What Does It Mean to Be Ethical?

Ethics is defined as “the decisions, choices and actions we make that reflect and enact our values and morals.” For thousands of years, one basic ethical standard has existed as part of most religions and has been encouraged by many famous philosophers. For example:

“What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”

~ Confucius

“We should behave to others as we wish others to behave to us.”

~ Aristotle

“As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.”

~ Jesus Christ

You probably know this ethical standard as the Golden Rule. The reality is that while ethics can be taught and learned by most individuals, living in an ethical manner remains a *personal choice*.

Each day you make personal choices about things that affect you, your family, your patients, your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors, people driving down the street, a man out walking his dog...wait...STOP! You wonder how your personal choices affect some stranger walking his dog?

Well, what if you make a personal choice to take your eyes off the road as you dig in your purse for your ringing cell phone? As a result, you swerve your car and hit a man who is out walking his dog. The accident changes all of your lives completely.

Many small details of life (even deciding to answer a cell phone) can involve ethics and integrity. Obviously, having integrity and making ethical decisions is vital in healthcare because human lives are at stake.

Putting Ethics and Integrity Together

What do you value? Values are all the things you believe to be of worth and importance in life. You probably learned your values at home (from your family) but you may also be influenced by friends, school, church and overall society. For example, some families place a high value on accumulating wealth. Other families place high value on charity and building a better community. Your values determine what decisions you make in the world.

How about morals? Morals are the way you decide what is right or wrong, good or bad. Your morals are shaped by your values. For example, someone who places high value on *accumulating wealth* may decide it is right to build a shopping mall (which provides jobs and makes money) instead of a play ground. Conversely, the person who values *community* may decide a play ground (which would benefit families) is the right thing to build.

In a nutshell:

- Your *values*, which are generally taught at home (and influenced by society), shape your *morals*.
- Your morals influence the *decisions* you make and the *actions* you take.
- When your *actions match your values*, you are living with integrity!

Why It Matters

Do people at work know where you stand on work-related issues? Go back to the examples at the beginning of the chapter. Say you value promptness and honesty—and you even talk about these values during a pre-hire interview. Let's say these expressed values, along with your healthcare experience, are the keys to you getting hired.

Upon being hired, you behave in a way that *matches* your values. You arrive at work and at meetings on time. You never take a longer break than what is allowed. You turn in your paperwork before the deadline and you finish all your tasks by the end of your shift.

One day you get stuck in traffic and can't make it to work on time. You apologize and are forgiven. You may get a little ribbing from co-workers who know how important promptness is to you...but overall, no harm comes from you being late.

A month later, you oversleep and come in late again. You are embarrassed by your behavior so you use traffic as your excuse—even though traffic was light. Now, you've acted in a way that *doesn't* match your values. You were late and you lied about the traffic because you needed an excuse for the behavior.

What do you think this behavior says about you? Your traffic excuse was an obvious lie to some of your co-workers who take the same route coming to work. Do you think your behavior changes the way they feel about you?

“He that is good for making excuses is seldom good for anything else.”

~ Benjamin Franklin

Tips for Behaving with Integrity

- **Clarify your values.** This is a life-long process. Your values will change over time as you learn and grow. Set aside a certain time each year (like on your birthday or New Year's Day) to write down all the things you value and how you will behave in a way that reflects those values.
- **Communicate your values to others.** You can't expect others to know your values through on behaviors that mean you expect that behavior from you.
- **Be honest with yourself and others.** Don't let "hot air" and it's obvious when you live from paycheck to paycheck, you drive an expensive car, something is out of the truth, you'll have a hard time convincing others.
- **Don't blame other people for things you are in charge.** Take responsibility for your actions.

That's the end of the sample! To read the entire book, order online at www.embracingcivility.com or www.amazon.com