

## *The Patient Experience Post*

Healthcare's Resource for  
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## Silence Isn't Always Golden: 3 tips for confronting problem behaviors head on

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Whoever coined the phrase "silence is golden" was not talking about a management technique. It's widely accepted that positive reinforcement is one of the best ways to increase good behavior. But don't be fooled into thinking that ignoring overtly bad behavior or marginal performance is the antithesis of positive reinforcement.

It's human nature to want to avoid confrontation. After all, confrontation is uncomfortable, and who wants to self-inflict pain? It's the rare manager who doesn't shy away from confrontation to some degree. Face it; it's so much easier to give praise for a good job than it is to confront someone about poor performance. But for every day that you delay confronting problems, you are sending the message that everything is just fine, and your silence is not going unnoticed. In fact, it's very likely that your star performers are watching closely, and wondering why you turn a blind eye to the problems. Worst of all, many managers end up delegating more work to the star performers to pick up the slack created when marginal performers are allowed to function at less than full capacity. It may not be intentional, but it happens frequently. You turn to the people you can count on to get the job done, and the end result is that the slackers slide by.

On the spectrum of difficult conversations, it is often easier to talk about something like being late than it is to talk about poor attitude. One disengaged person poisons the well of the workforce. You know it's there, but you just can't bring yourself to deal with it. But again, your silence implies that bad behavior is acceptable. And every time you authorize payroll, you provide the same reward to the people with poor performance as that of the star performers. But the good news is that it's never too late to learn to deal with problem behaviors and improve your confrontation skills. The following three steps will help you to master the art of confrontation.

**Plan ahead.** Prepare for your discussion. Write down the key points that you want to make. Be ready to spell out the facts and give specific examples. Use the coaching technique described in [Raising the Bar on Service Excellence](#) (Baird, 2008, Golden Lamp Press) called the XYZ Formula (*When you do X, it causes Y. I'd like you to do Z.*)

**Practice.** Find someone with whom you can practice the tough confrontation discussion. Ask them to challenge you or get defensive so that you can practice sticking to the facts. Practice being patient with silence. If you are nervous, you may have a tendency to talk more than you need to. Practice speaking more slowly, and learn to be more comfortable with silence. Don't try to fill the silence, or you'll end up babbling and diluting your important message. Say what you need to say and be done with it.

**Debrief.** Immediately following the discussion, spend some time alone to reflect on what transpired. Jot down a few notes about what went well and what didn't go so well. Think about how to improve your technique in the future. Schedule a date to follow up with the person with whom you have had the discussion. Setting the date will force you to look for progress so that you will be prepared to report back to the person. After all, you will want to seek opportunities to reinforce positive improvements that demonstrate the person is making an effort to improve.

By following these steps whenever you need to have a difficult conversation, you will be setting yourself up for success and honing skills that will build your credibility as a confident and competent leader.

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*Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000).*