

## *The Patient Experience Post*

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Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

## “Here comes another...” How to Boost Empathy by Saying Goodbye to Judgment

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Empathy is what puts the care into healthcare. Without it, patients become just a number, just a case, just a disease. But empathy requires the absence of judgment and, unfortunately, human beings have a strong tendency to be judgmental. Over the years, we form impressions and have experiences and interactions with people that become our frame of reference and how we view the world. Based on these past impressions, we make judgments in new situations, assuming the new experience will be the same as ones we've had in the past.

But, with most of these new experiences, there's one important thing that's different—the individual.

### **No, They're Not the Same**

Physicians and other clinicians see dozens, hundreds, even thousands of patients throughout the course of their careers. There are certain commonalities among these patients, but those commonalities shouldn't be assumed.

- All patients asking for medication to relieve pain are not drug seekers.
- All patients who come in smelling strongly of cigarette smoke aren't unhealthy or unwilling to listen to healthcare providers.
- All patients dressed in worn or tattered clothing aren't homeless.

There's one thing, though, that all patients are—they're all in need of your compassionate, non-judgmental, empathetic approach to their care.

### **Empathy is at the Core of the Patient Experience**

Empathy is core to providing a great patient experience. As human beings, it takes us just seconds to form judgments of others. Unless we can consciously learn to suspend judgment and assume a neutral position *with each patient we encounter*, we can't meet patients where they are and help them.

In our [Power of One](#) training, one of the things we work with attendees on is helping them to recognize and overcome judgmental thoughts. Many react very quickly to certain stimuli, or certain images, and quickly articulate negative comments formed by negative thoughts as in the examples above.

What we've learned over the years is that by teaching people to recognize their judgmental tendencies and their own triggers, we can help them learn to suspend judgment. When they suspend judgment, they are more able to be truly empathetic.

The reactions of participants in this session have been profound. They often don't even realize that their own biases move them further and further away from being empathetic. That's when judgment kicks in. When judgment kicks in, they begin to believe their own myths.

### Creating a Judgment-Free Care Experience

In addition to managing your own biases and judgments, it's also important to monitor the words and behaviors of others. What kind of language is being used in your organization? What kind of labeling is so common that it's engrained in the culture?

I'll never forget the time I was in the ER with my chronically ill sister who was having an emergent issue and overheard a nurse say, "Oh, here comes the train wreck." To my horror, this comment was met with laughter. Her comment was hurtful and disrespectful. It sent a message that the organizational culture was one of labeling and disrespect.

When you meet a new patient for the first time, regardless of the situation or the setting, you know very little about them. Strive to not make assumptions based on past experiences with *other* patients. Keep your judgment in check and help others to do the same. Your patients will have a better experience because of it!

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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). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684.