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Walking the Talk: Four leadership actions that show service is a priority

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

As leaders, we sometimes forget that the things we do make a difference and that our actions often speak more loudly than our words. Employees pay attention to not only what we say, but what we do—and they look for consistency between the two. That consistency is often referred to as “walking the talk.” Are you “walking the talk”? Do your behaviors and actions back up the things you say and support your organization’s mission, vision, values and purpose in tangible ways? If not, or if you’re not sure, here are four actions you can take to make sure that you’re “walking the talk” and demonstrating that customer service is truly a priority.

1. Rounding: Making rounds on your staff sends a clear message that you care about them and the service they deliver. But effective rounding involves more than just showing up; it is not a “drive-by” assessment where you simply ask how they’re doing. It should be a process through which you demonstrate a vested interest in what’s happening in their department, on their floor or in their unit. Effective rounding provides visible evidence that you’re present and making an effort to connect with staff to ensure that they have the tools, resources and support they need to provide exceptional service to patients. Your staff should also recognize that you’re willing to roll up your sleeves to help out or pitch in when they need assistance. That visible support and evidence of your commitment to them, and to your patients, can make a big difference.

2. Recognizing effort and reinforcing behavior: You’ve heard the saying, “What gets recognized, gets repeated.” It’s true. We mirror the behaviors of those around us, especially when those behaviors result in positive feedback and reinforcement. When you see someone doing a good job, take the time to recognize the effort and thank him or her. Be specific, prompt and personal. Point out what you noticed and explain why you appreciate it. Tell them how their actions help support a commitment to patient service. The recognition provides important reinforcement to the individual receiving the feedback, and your actions send a clear signal to other staff members that you notice and value service-centered behaviors. If you don’t think recognition is important to your staff members, just ask them.

I recently had a surprising and somewhat disheartening interaction with an organization that reminded me of the importance of relating back to the mission, vision and values. The managers I’m working with agreed that everybody is working very hard, but they’re concerned that morale is suffering. I asked a group of managers what they thought was motivating staff to do good work. More than half of them said money. But, when I met with staff in two separate focus groups and asked the same question, only one person out of both groups mentioned money. What did the rest mention? They cited factors such as being recognized, being thanked for their efforts, and thinking

they were making a difference in patients' lives.

Money can be a convenient excuse for us to use when morale is low. "The economy is tight, and we can't afford to pay more." That is a common misconception among managers, because in the vast majority of cases, especially in health care, it's not about the money. It's about making a difference — and, just as importantly, being recognized for that effort.

3. Relating back to mission, vision, values and purpose: "Walking the talk" is all about coming full circle in terms of the mission, vision, values and purpose the organization espouses; the expectations you have and convey as a manager; and how your own actions reinforce those expectations and support the mission, vision, values and purpose. It's important to not make assumptions here. Don't assume that just because you can see the connection between your work and the organization's mission, vision and values, that others do too. One good way to avoid assumptions is to discuss the connection with your staff. Help them to see how their work connects to the mission. It will reinforce the importance of service excellence, your expectations of them, how you measure performance and how you're currently doing. And tie it all back to your organization's mission, vision, values and purpose to bring it full circle.

Another organization I worked with recently was very proud that they had trained everyone to memorize their core values. But, when I held focus groups with employees, I discovered that those ideas had not been brought full circle. Although they could recite the core values, when I asked how they knew what was expected of them in terms of customer service, no one made the connection back to those values. Even after prompting them and asking about the tie to the values, they didn't make the connection. In fact, when I talked with the managers about this, they didn't seem to make the connection, either. One manager even said, "Oh, those values have nothing to do with customer service." Really?

4. Reporting: Employees need to understand not only what's expected of them, but also how well they're doing. Clearly defined goals should include metrics for measuring results, and those results need to be reported back to staff members, along with the appropriate amount of celebration and course correction. As we work with organizations around the country, one of the biggest causes for disengagement is that employees don't think they're a part of the big picture. This occurs because they're not getting enough direct feedback about their work and the impact it has on service outcomes. They need to know they make a difference. By reporting back to employees about their performance—and how patients perceive what they're doing—you can help them connect their work with patient satisfaction in tangible ways.

The four steps I have outlined are fairly simple, yet not necessarily easy. You may even be doing one or two of them already. But are you consistent? If your staff was to give you a grade for your performance in each of the categories, how would you fare? Doing all four consistently sends a clear message that you value service and make it a priority in your daily work.

In my work, I have the honor of seeing the dedicated leaders whose vision drives them to challenge the status quo and who will never settle for less than excellence. These service champions push against seemingly insurmountable barriers and yet continue in their quest, knowing that their work makes a difference. As a leader, remember that your actions make a difference. So stay the course and make 2011 the year when you form new and vital leadership habits.

*Learn more about ways you can ensure that all of your customer interactions, including over-the-phone interactions, support your healthcare organization's brand, as in [Living Your Brand Promise](#), featuring Kent Seltman, co-author of *Management Lessons From Mayo Clinic*. As the former Director of Marketing at Mayo Clinic, Seltman was charged with managing the brand for this world-renowned organization. During this 90-minute presentation, you'll hear about crucial elements in aligning the brand promise with the patient experience in order to build trust and credibility with customers. For only \$89, you'll receive all this: pre-session worksheets, a session workbook, webinar slides, and an audio CD of the 90-minute webinar, complete with the Q&A session.*

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