

Forgive and forget?

By Richard Hader, PhD, NE-BC, RN, CHE, CPHQ, FAAN,
Editor-in-Chief; Senior Vice President and Chief Nurse Officer,
Meridian Health System, Neptune, N.J.



*It may be
years before
a mistake
is forgiven.
Even worse?
Your mistake
may never be
forgotten.*

Whether you're a seasoned nurse leader or have just assumed a formal management role, one thing is certain—you'll make mistakes. Leaders are constantly under scrutiny for their own work performance while simultaneously bearing the burden of ensuring others achieve their goals. Leading people is a daunting task that's often thwarted by mistakes. The lesson for leaders is to minimize those mistakes by appropriately planning and consistently delivering clear messages. Fortunately, most of our errors in judgment aren't life threatening; however, the repercussions of a mistake can last a long time.

Years ago when I began working closely with one of the nursing units, I made one of the most regrettable mistakes I've ever made as a leader. The nurses on the unit were extremely difficult to motivate. Although they said they worked as a team, it wasn't evident in their outcomes, and the day-to-day leaders on the unit had difficulty making any breakthrough to achieve unit-based goals. In retrospect, they were poorly staffed, lacked leadership, and trying to do the best they could with available resources.

As the VP for nursing, I stepped in, but I became frustrated. Without thinking it through, I presented an analogy that the unit was similar to "flying in coach status" whereas their colleagues on another unit were "flying in first-class." You can just imagine how that went over with the staff members. This is a true example of how the leader (me) didn't adequately prepare and how becoming emotional about a situation can lead to an escalation of misjudgment.

Of course, my misspoken words echoed around the organization like a lightning bolt hitting a large electrical transformer. My response included several apologies and a plan to mend fences and move forward. I also asked for forgiveness, but it was years later before I fully recuperated from this single statement. Although it was a difficult situation, I came away from it with a few valuable lessons.

A golden rule when meeting with your team members is to leave your emotions at the door but let your passion for the work shine. Passion for achieving professional goals can be a hallmark of success for any leader, but spending emotional energy may divert you from achieving those goals. How do you define the difference between emotion and passion for work? Emotion becomes personalized; passion for your work is a professional attribute that sparks innovation and commitment while simultaneously focusing on achieving key objectives.

Before meeting with your staff about sensitive issues, develop a plan and key talking points to help you remain focused and achieve the desired results. Take the time to seek advice from your colleagues or a supervisor who might have been in a similar situation, and address their lessons learned.

If you aren't adequately prepared to meet with your staff about sensitive issues, it's more prudent to wait rather than make emotional mistakes. Remember, you're a leader and when you make a mistake, it may be years before that mistake is forgiven. Even worse? Your mistake may never be forgotten. **NM**

DOI-10.1097/01.NUMA.0000413099.69585.14



nursing.management@wolterskluwer.com