Pearls

Improve your professional etiquette

By Kathleen D. Pagana, PhD, RN

More than most careers, nursing is characterized by professional relationships among different people in numerous settings. Use these seven professional etiquette tips to polish your communication skills and strengthen your relationships with patients, families, and colleagues.

1. **Introduce yourself.** Put out your hand for a handshake and say your name in a confident voice. Be ready to introduce colleagues to others as well. Mention the higher-ranking person in the organization first. Give the name of the person you’re making the introduction to first, then say the name of the person being introduced and say something about that person. Then say something about the first person.1

2. **Have a confident handshake.** Many people judge others by the quality of their handshake, so make sure it’s confident and firm (but not too firm—don’t overdo it). Stand up, lean forward, make eye contact, and smile. However, take into consideration cultural preferences and sensitivities—for example, Hindu men don’t shake hands with women.1

3. **Keep conversations on track.** To avoid inadvertently offending someone, stay away from controversial topics such as religion and politics. When talking with a patient, remember that you’re the caregiver. Don’t unload your troubles on your patients. If you have trouble getting a conversation started, try using the acronym OAR to help: Make an Observation. Ask questions. Reveal something about yourself, but avoid getting too personal.1

4. **Watch your body language.** When making conversation, don’t forget that the care you invest in your words can be undone by nonverbal communication. Stand tall with your shoulders back and your chin up; avoid slouching. Keep your hands out of your pockets, and don’t put your hands on your hips or cross them over your chest. Use a sincere smile to convey warmth and friendliness. Look at the eyes of the person you’re talking with to show your interest.

5. **Cultivate a positive work environment.** Be polite and courteous to your colleagues, no matter how stressful the situation. When you show respect for others and make others feel valued, you contribute to effective communication and team building.

6. **Dress for success.** If you dress too casually, patients may question your professionalism and attention to detail. Make sure your uniform, lab coat, scrubs, and shoes are clean and professional looking. Clothes shouldn’t be too tight or skirts too short. If your hair is long, pull it up and out of your face. Make certain your name tag is visible and readable.

7. **Present a positive, professional image.** Recently, I went to a medical center across town for an audiology consult. When I checked in, I was given a form to fill out and was told to wait until someone called my name. A woman dressed in white called my name and put out her hand. Thinking it was for a handshake, I put my hand out. However, she indicated that she’d put her hand out for the form I’d filled out. She directed me to another room, sat down, and started asking me questions. Because she never introduced herself and her name tag was turned over, I had to ask her to identify herself and describe her role in the organization. Because she ignored my handshake, she missed an important opportunity to introduce herself and present a positive, professional image. Exercising professional etiquette doesn’t take a lot of time or effort, so make it a part of your everyday practice.

REFERENCE


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