

# There is No Place for Fear in Health Care

Think about what happens when people feel fearful. We become immobilized, doubting ourselves and our own experience. We contract into ourselves....questioning every move, and holding back our thoughts and concerns. We try to protect ourselves. As we pull back into ourselves, we end up withholding our knowledge and experience; and yet, knowledge and experience are essential to providing quality health care. When fear enters the workplace, patients become at risk.

When there is fear in health care...

- An MA will sit quietly through a meeting, not offering her opinion, even though the problem being discussed is critical to her expertise.
- A surgical assistant will not speak up even though he sees a problem emerging during surgery.
- An RN will not call a physician about a patient concern.
- An entire clinic team will endure an ineffectual leader for fear of losing their jobs if they speak up and advocate for a better environment.

What causes Fear in the Health Care setting?

- People using their position or status to intimidate
- Outbursts of temper
- Refusal to listen
- Argumentativeness or aggressiveness
- Public humiliation and criticism
- Punishment
- Threats to someone's employment

When I come out to a clinic or hospital, sometimes there are so many communicate problems that the leaders don't know where to start. In my opinion, the first place to start is always **Stop the Damage**. It can be a Herculean task to get people to be willing to go to one another directly and honestly, when they have had repeated experiences with emotional blow-ups and other aggressive behavior.

## **Six Important guidelines for Stopping the Damage:**

1. Have ground rules for respectful behavior.
2. Start with yourself: Ask for feedback. Are you engaging in any fear producing behavior? If so, be open and honest with your team on how you are working to improve your own behavior.
3. Practice with team members how to respond to someone when they aren't following one of the ground rules.

4. Speak up when you witness a violation and redirect the person to a more successful way of handling the interaction. This is particularly important in meeting settings.
5. Meet with individuals who have a past history of poor interactions, set goals, timelines and practice with them.
6. Have realistic consequences in place for anyone who repeatedly violates the agreed about norms. It is critical that aggressive, intimidating and punishing behavior is considered a “nonnegotiable” rule in your clinic or hospital.

Sometimes a clinic or hospital will target their efforts on the behavior of their staff and administrative members, and not address provider behavior. Clinics and hospitals who involve their entire health care community are the ones who realize the most success. Striving to get the providers onboard first and being the strongest advocates for change will produce the quickest and more enduring results.

Here is an example of behavioral expectations from a large specialty clinic that was mutually created by providers and staff:

- While we acknowledge a wide range of communication styles in our department, diversity or style should not create the impression of:*
- a. Being emotionally out of control; e.g. yelling, swearing, personal attack*
  - b. Disparaging a co-worker by blaming, personalized criticism, condescension, laughing at someone’s expense, and/or public berating*
  - c. Refusing to listen and/or talk with a co-worker; displayed by continual interruption, cutting off conversations, dominating the interaction.*
  - d. Regardless of status, position in the department, you have the right to let that person know that you are having a problem with their communication.*

Once fear no longer has a confining grip on the members of the team, they become open to learning how speak up, share their expertise, and offer their concerns and recommendations and go to one another directly with their disagreements. When everyone’s talents are brought to the table, then the patient is able to fully benefit.