

Beyond Customer Service: The Challenge to Caregivers

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Do you and your team squirm when you hear about the need for better “customer service?” I’m convinced that how we talk about service improvement has fueled this resistance. And this resistance has hampered our efforts to create truly healing environments for patients, families and our caregiver teams.

Why the Resistance?

Many nurses resent use of the word “customer.” They view patients as very different from “customers.” Patients are sick and vulnerable. And unlike “customers,” the nurse’s goal is to care for them and care about them and help them heal, not just make them “happy.”

Many nurses resent the maxim, “The (patient as) customer is always right.” The responsible nurse can point out many situations in which it is irresponsible to cater to the patient and family’s wants and preferences. Should you provide medicine that is unsafe for the patient? Should you give the patient pizza because the patient is hungry and begs for pizza the night before surgery? Should you share confidential information with a family friend who feels irate when you won’t give them information about the patient’s condition?

Many nurses see customer service strategies as cosmetic and superficial. They feel insulted at the very idea that leaders think they need to learn to care. Some even call skill-building workshops “charm school” to learn how to interact with patients. After all, they are healthcare professionals who care deeply. They work with patients who are sick and dying. The thought of being taught to smile more touches a raw nerve.

Also, **many nurses resent the focus on their behavior, instead of on the obstacles that get in the way of giving great care.** Perhaps they experience a shortage of transporters that results in long delays in a cumbersome discharge process. Or maybe an inadequate delivery system requires nurses to leave the floor to pick up needed supplies, taking precious time away from patients. Or maybe they can’t find a blood pressure cuff, an IV pole, a wheelchair, a monitor or even a pillow or fresh sheet when that’s what the patient needs.

Reframing Customer Service: Five Message Points That Open Minds

The customer satisfaction lingo popular over the last few years has addressed an important need. It has raised staff awareness that patients and families have choices among providers and that patient and family satisfaction and the resulting grapevine influences these choices. Also, the customer focus has helped staff realize that patient satisfaction affects our organization's future and our jobs.

Now, it's time to move to the next level, both in our language, rationales and strategies. To pursue this next level, I propose five message points that I've found reduce nurse resistance and foster inspired engagement.

Five Message Points That Bolster Nurse Engagement

| | From | To |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Great customer service | Care with compassion |
| 2 | Being caring | Making sure our caring comes across |
| 3 | Making patients happy | Reducing patient anxiety |
| 4 | Paying more attention | Paying quality attention |
| 5 | Your leadership responsibility | Your personal calling |

Message Point 1: Let's talk about "care with compassion," not "customer service."

Care with compassion brings to mind most nurses' initial calling to a healing procession. The concept "care with compassion" does not raise hackles. It is non-controversial and in harmony with every nurse's professional goals and self-image. It is also substantive, not cosmetic. It evokes empathy for the patient's discomfort and plight and encourages emotional generosity and personalized care. Making the case for care with compassion, our rationale addresses what is unique to health care – that patients are sick, scared, pained, and vulnerable. They need us and depend on us. Everything we can do to be a healing force in their anxiety-ridden experience is a gift.

Message Point 2: Let's not question whether people are caring enough. People are caring. Our challenge is to make sure our caring comes across.

It's no wonder that nurses feel insulted at reminders to be caring. Most resent it. The message needs to be this: Clearly, you care deeply. The question is, does your caring come across to patients? What a sad shame it is when patients don't *feel* that caring. It is not enough to mean well, think caring

thoughts or be driven by good intentions. These are not necessarily visible to the patient.

Let's say a nurse calls a patient "honey." While some patients don't mind that, many do. Yet, certainly nurses who call patients "honey," mean well. They want to show caring and warmth. The problem is that many patients resent it and so, despite the nurse's intent, the patient feels disrespected. Or, a nurse says to a patient's daughter, "Visiting hours are over. Don't worry. Your mother will be fine." The nurse intends to offer reassurance. But it backfires. The daughter resents being told what to feel. It's her mother after all. The daughter hears the nurse as dismissive instead of caring.

There are many untapped opportunities to help nurses more effectively communicate their caring and thereby create a better experience for patients and families. Here are six communication skills that help caregivers communicate their caring, making it palpable to the patient!

Heart-to-Heart Communication

| <i>6 Ways to Make Your Caring Visible</i> | <i>More about This</i> | <i>An Example</i> |
|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Active listening | Acknowledging and reflecting back the person's feeling in a non-judgmental way | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I can imagine this might feel scary to you." • "You seem upset this morning." |
| Showing caring nonverbally | Use facial expression, intonation, posture, eye contact and the like to mirror the patient's feelings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing a sense of urgency nonverbally as you enter the room to respond to a call light. • Screwing up your forehead to show concern, when the patient appears upset. |
| Making explicit your positive intent | Explain your purpose. How is what you're doing in the best interest of the patient? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I want to make you comfortable. Here's a blanket." • "I want to help you with your pain." |
| Using the words "for you" | Make it clear that the patient is your focus. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'll call your daughter for you." • "Let me check on the test results for you." |
| The blameless apology | Express genuine regret that the patient is having a negative experience, without taking the blame or blaming anyone else | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm so sorry it's been a frustrating morning for you." • "I'm really sorry about the delay." |
| Expressing appreciation | Give the personal gift of positive regard | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I really admire your courage." • "Thank you so much for speaking up." |

These skills are neither simple nor obvious. I've found nurses to be very open to sharpening these skills so that patients and families perceive them as the caring people they are.

Message Point 3: It's not a matter of paying more attention to patients. It's a matter of paying better attention to patients.

In response to customer service strategies, many nurses express frustration that their managers' expectations are unrealistic—that their managers are urging them to spend more time with patients to provide better service. The fact is, unless barriers are removed and staffing and processes improved, there is no more time to be had. The inference that nurses should spend more time—time that they don't have—is maddening to them. It's helpful to focus not on quantity of time, but on the quality of the time spent.

If I could advance one skill that would create breakthroughs for patient satisfaction and anxiety reduction, it would be the skill of “presence” or “mindfulness.” This involves controlling your attention so the person on the receiving end feels like the center of your universe at that moment. It's possible to learn the skill of presence with payoffs for both the patient and the caregiver. Patients feel your focus and caring, you connect with them, and your work becomes more meaningful. When you practice presence, the patient feels that they are your sole focus. They also feel like your soul focus. And this helps them feel supported, less anxious and grateful. The pivotal skill of presence doesn't take more time. It makes every moment of connection with the patient precious.

Message Point 4: Patient satisfaction isn't about making patients happy. It's about reducing their anxiety.

Borrowing the customer service mindset from the entertainment and hospitality trades, many healthcare leaders stress the importance of making patients happy. It's not uncommon to hear nurses respond, “This is health care. We are not Disney!” It would be much more powerful if we were to shift from talking about “making patients happy” to “reducing their anxiety.” The anxiety reduction focus is driven by compassion, and it acknowledges that patients are not your typical customers. Patients and their families are ridden with anxiety. The caring caregiver can significantly reduce anxiety by word and deed. That's what we should be addressing with our nursing teams. At each step of the care process, what can we do to prevent or reduce the patient's anxiety? This, they do not teach in charm school.

Message Point 5: Enhancing care with compassion is not just another leadership responsibility. I feel passionate about it.

Some patient care leaders unknowingly communicate ambivalence about the importance of raising the bar on service quality. Some sound apologetic about adding pressure to their nurses. Others see pursuit of greater patient satisfaction as a senior management dictate. Others defend, "Most of our nurses don't need it." And still others think that, given the demanding nature of nursing jobs, it's all they can do to complete their tasks, let alone take time to express more caring. Needless to say, when the leader hedges, the staff hear this and take it less seriously.

Hopefully, by reframing customer service to be all about care with compassion, you as leader can wholeheartedly commit to it publicly with conviction. This helps to inspire your team to engage wholeheartedly as well.

Consider planning how to powerfully express your commitment so it in turn elevates your team's commitment. Here's a suggested approach.

Plan for a Powerful Statement of Personal Commitment

| | | |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Your commitment: | What do you want people to join you in achieving? | "I am determined that, as a team, we create an even more healing environment for our patients and families. Providing care with compassion is what drove me into health care. It's what makes my work meaningful. We have a real opportunity to make an even bigger difference to our patients. That's what our strategy to enhance the patient experience is all about. I'm personally committed to it and excited about the prospects." |
| Your rationale | What are the compelling benefits to patients, families and your team? | "Patients and families are so vulnerable. They really need us. By becoming more effective at how we show our caring to them, they will feel better and appreciate us for it. Also, when we effectively communicate our caring, we get more cooperation and feel better about our work." |
| A pinch of empathy | A statement that shows you realize this may not be easy for people | "Now, I realize that you have a LOT on your plate already, a lot to do and many priorities." |
| Your commitment restated | Again what you want people to join you in achieving | "Still, I'm convinced this is so important that we have to figure out how to make it happen." |
| An appeal for commitment and collaboration | A direct request for their commitment | "I'm personally committed. I'm going to do my all, and I'm asking you to join me in this." |

The Challenge

It's time to lead our teams beyond customer service to embrace care with compassion as our goal and build the communication skills and interactions that deliver on that promise. Patients and families rely on our care teams to provide a healing environment and they deserve it. And our care teams rely on us as leaders to help them provide care with compassion and feel pride in their caring impact.

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