

6

CHOOSE  
YOUR  
BATTLES  
CAREFULLY

**L**eadership Lesson #6 is choose your battles carefully. Sometimes we spend a lot of time and effort trying to make obnoxious people happy, but they will never be happy! Not everyone will like you as a leader. Accept those who do and move on. Bradberry (2017b) agrees that not everyone will support you. In fact, he suggests that most people will not.

Sometimes, though, this is hard to do. I'm sure we can all think of a situation or two where some truly obnoxious person was able to bring us down to his or her level. The problem is that these individuals are likely much better at bullying than you, because they've had more practice. And when you try to compete with a bully, you're probably going to lose.

That brings me back to a situation where I learned this lesson the hard way. I was a staff nurse in the ICU. One of the local vascular surgeons, whom I'll call Dr. X, had a quick temper and a history of bullying nurses. His policy was that postoperative patients with a temperature of 37.4 degrees C or higher needed nasotracheal (NT) suctioning to keep their lungs clear. Because NT suctioning was so traumatic to patients, the nurses often tried some basic cooling measures first.

On this particular day, I finished morning handoff and went in to check on one of my patients who was recovering uneventfully from a femoral artery bypass. He was under numerous blankets, and when I checked his temperature, it was 37.4 degrees C. I informed the patient that I was going to

**“Some people will inundate you with negativity, passive aggression, anger, or jealousy, but none of this matters, because, as Dr. Seuss said, ‘Those that matter don’t mind, and those that mind don’t matter.’ We can’t possibly get support from everyone, and we definitely can’t spend our time and energy trying to win over the people who don’t support us. Letting go of the opinions of people who don’t matter frees up time and energy for the people and things that do.”**

—Travis Bradberry (2017b, para. 14)

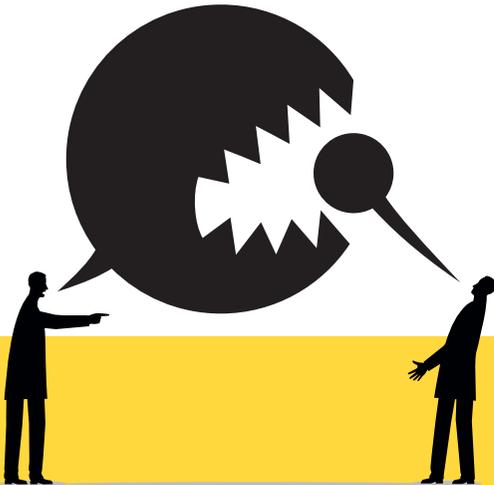
take off a few blankets and let him wake up, and then I would recheck his temperature. Just then, I turned around and saw Dr. X standing behind me. He moved to within inches of my face and began screaming at the top of his voice, asking whether I thought this patient looked like a lizard. I was more than a little confused. I was also embarrassed, because every nurse in the unit was watching the interaction. Even the patients in other cubicles were trying to see what was going on.

When I asked Dr. X what he meant about the patient looking like a lizard, he began yelling that the patient was not a cold-blooded animal that would adapt his temperature to his surroundings. My normal response would have been to try to collaborate with this doctor or at least to be respectful. But that day, I just got mad. Everyone was watching, and I was embarrassed. I did the worst possible thing to do with a bully: I tried to compete. I responded, “So tell me, Dr. X, why does a cooling blanket work?”

As you can imagine, Dr. X exploded. In fact, I think the whole unit shook! He was so angry that he was trembling. He immediately left the unit and went to see the Director of Nursing, demanding that I be fired. The phone rang several minutes later, and I was summoned to the nursing office for a chat. In the end, I was not fired. In fact, the nursing supervisor was very understanding—although she did ask me to really think about what I would do differently the next time to keep a situation like this from escalating.

One of the most important leadership lessons I learned from this situation was not to compete with a bully unless you absolutely have to. When someone “shoots angry at us, we sense it and instinctively throw it back at them. When this happens, we hook into their energy” (Pearson, 2010, para. 9). Try stepping back to pause and reflect on what has occurred so that you can gain control of your negative emotions. The ability to manage your emotions and remain calm under pressure is part of emotional intelligence and effective leadership (Bradberry, 2017a). The reality is that you likely can’t control

the bully’s behavior, but you *can* control your response and learn to react in a way that allows you to move forward.



**“TalentSmart conducted research with more than a million people, and found that 90% of top performers are skilled at managing their emotions in times of stress in order to remain calm and in control. One of their greatest gifts is the ability to identify toxic people and keep them at bay.”**

–Travis Bradberry (2017a, para. 19)

A second leadership lesson I learned was that if you are going to compete with a bully, don't do it in front of your patients. And finally, while fighting back did give me a momentary thrill, the result was that in doing so, I brought myself down to his level and gave up some of my own power. I must admit, though, I never had any trouble with him from that point on.

Whitbourne (2015) suggests that, when confronted by an obnoxious person, you first step back and attempt to understand the source of your annoyance. Is the behavior truly obnoxious, or are you responding to it with anger because it hits upon your insecurities? Secondly, she recommends that you try to ignore the obnoxious behavior if possible. Many people who behave in obnoxious ways do so to get attention, and the behavior may diminish if you don't give them that reinforcement.

At other times, however, Whitbourne (2015) notes that the individual causing the turmoil must be directly confronted. The confrontation sometimes needs to come from a person other than the target of the bullying. Involving your manager or someone with formal authority may be necessary, and incidents should be documented if they are repetitive. It is also important in confrontation to allow the offender to preserve some self-esteem if possible, or the conflict aftermath may be even greater than the original conflict. Dachis (2013, para. 12) agrees, suggesting that you shouldn't fight any battle

if you can't do so constructively and stay solution-focused: "If your goal is to hurt or just express your anger, you're fighting for the wrong reasons. Every single argument you have ought to aim to improve an undesirable situation."

The bottom line, though, is that all nurses must recognize that verbal abuse, incivility, and bullying are not simply part of the job. Bad behavior cannot be perpetually ignored. Nurses must stand up and defend themselves. Brunt (2015) notes that nurses and students need to be given information on how to address conflicts and change disruptive behavior in the workplace so that nurses, individually and collectively, can eliminate bullying and workplace violence.

**“CIVILITY COSTS NOTHING  
AND BUYS EVERYTHING.”**

—Mary Wortley Montagu  
(as cited in BrainyQuote, n.d.)



**“A lot of cheap seats in the arena are filled with people who never venture onto the floor. They just hurl mean-spirited criticisms and put-downs from a safe distance. The problem is, when we stop caring what people think and stop feeling hurt by cruelty, we lose our ability to connect. But when we’re defined by what people think, we lose the courage to be vulnerable. Therefore, we need to be selective about the feedback we let into our lives.”**

**—Brené Brown,  
*Rising Strong*  
(as cited in  
Lammersen,  
2017, para. 10)**

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