



How do you want to be remembered?

Dr David Oldham
 Medical Director
 Doctors Health Advisory Service WA

“People may not remember what you say, but they will always remember how you made them feel”.

The above, a slightly altered version of a famous quote by Maya Angelou, is the first of 10 commandments in an article written by a very senior doctor, James Paskert, at the end of his career. Paskert notes that he changed his behaviour towards other staff after 20 years as a surgeon, when he moved to a physician manager role. He found that a “definitive, authoritative and borderline arrogant approach” didn’t work so well outside the operating theatre (and may not be the best approach in theatre either).

The other nine commandments make similar wise statements borne out of years of experience. I’ve summarised the ones most relevant to practising clinicians below:

Happiness exists in the “grey zone”.

Paskert used to pride himself on being seen as “black or white”. He eventually realised that from a practical point of view, most issues are really not that starkly black or white and that this approach “fosters a bully attitude and makes others reactionary”. He learnt that the middle grey zone was “where collegiality and teamwork flourished” and where the best parts of black and white were joined to make a decision that benefits the most.

Think “and” not “or” for the win.

Medical and specialty training can be highly competitive. We learn as students and doctors that you either “win or lose” in a given situation. However, as doctors we need to think “win-win”. This means being inclusive and asking others what they think, in order to achieve the best outcome.

As Paskert says, “Check your ego at the door and forget that ‘captain of the ship’ thing.”

51% is rarely enough – build consensus

“Majority rules sounds like a great idea... but a simple majority will rarely provide the support you need, particularly on the difficult ones.”

As Paskert notes, it’s important to build consensus, especially when dealing with doctors. Resolutions that pass by a narrow margin are rarely successful.

Become an attentive listener

Paskert says “I talk too much.” Over time, he learnt the art of “active listening” which did not come naturally to him. This meant consciously not interrupting others when they were talking and engaging in genuine dialogue. At times, it’s best to avoid the desire to dominate the discussion and accept being a minor or supporting contributor to the overall process.

Build a goodwill bank account with the physicians (other doctors and staff)

“You can’t be a change agent until you are a trusted source. In the goodwill bank account, make as many deposits as you can and limit withdrawals,” says Paskert.

He also notes the most important first step for doctors in a leadership role is to build a good relationship with the doctors (and other staff) around them.

What does this mean for us as doctors? Although Paskert’s article was written for clinician managers, all of the commandments are just as important for doctors at any level from intern to senior consultant. How you act and behave towards others will determine their feelings towards you.

As a junior doctor, I observed some very good and some very bad examples of behaviour from my seniors. It came as no surprise that some struggled to build a referral base and were often in conflict with colleagues. So when you go to work, have a think about the impact of your behaviour and how you make your colleagues feel.

24/7 helpline

For doctors who are not sure what to do or who want to speak with a DHASWA doctor, contact (08) 9321 3098.

www.dhaswa.com.au

Reference:

1. Paskert, J. P. (2014). A Seasoned CMO’s ‘Ten Commandments’ for Physician Leaders. The American Association for Physician Leadership. physicianleaders.org/news/seasoned-cmo-offers-ten-commandments-for-physician-leaders