

EDITORIAL

Ethical sensitivity: Shaping the everyday work environment

DEBRA JACKSON, MICHELLE CLEARY* AND JUDY MANNIX†

University of Technology, Sydney, NSW, Australia; *National University of Singapore, Singapore;

†University of Western Sydney, Parramatta, NSW, Australia

Ethical behaviours are much discussed and their importance is widely acknowledged (Cleary, Horsfall, Jackson, & Hunt, 2012). While many ethical guideline documents and codes of conduct aim to promote ethical conduct in the workplace (Cleary, Walter, Andrew, & Jackson, 2013), their efficacy is questionable, given the continued reports in the literature of workplace violations and poor collegial behaviours (Hutchinson, Jackson, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2006a; Jackson et al., 2010b). This is a matter of concern to nurses, and the dissonance between nursing's espoused values and the workplace experiences of many nurses has been acknowledged (Broome & Williams-Evans, 2011). Indeed, it can be difficult to reconcile the ethos of the caring profession with the behaviour that is widely reported as being seen and experienced in the workplace (Hutchinson et al., 2006a; Hutchinson, Jackson, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2006b; Jackson, Hutchinson, et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2010a).

Often ethics are only considered in relation to research or clinical dilemmas. However, ethical behaviour (or misbehaviour) is something that affects our everyday lives. Ideally, ethical behaviour should be enacted every day, in and through the encounters we have with others and should shape our every action and interaction. Ethical behaviour is intrinsically linked with personal values. Personal values such as having a sense of right and wrong and treating people as we ourselves want to be treated guide behaviour and shape the ways we interact with colleagues.

The term 'ethical sensitivity' has been defined as 'that which enables professionals to recognise, interpret and respond appropriately to the concerns of those receiving professional services' (Weaver, Morse, & Mitcham, 2008). However, it is also understood as a form of 'practical wisdom' (Weaver et al., 2008) and something far more

expansive than simply following written rules. This wider conceptualisation of ethical sensitivity can be used to describe people who have an innate sense of right and wrong, who embody positive ethical relationships and who have the moral courage to adhere to a personal set of ethics in their dealings with people. This courage is especially important in environments in which there is poor ethical sensitivity, where there may be pressure to turn a blind eye or overlook poor practices.

Poor ethical sensitivity and unethical behaviour negatively affects the workplace and can become normalised. This in turn has a deleterious effect on the workplace culture and on professional behaviours. Normalising bad behaviour means that people become inured to it, no longer object to it and can even come to expect it. This can be seen in the prevalence of bullying, workplace incivility and other organisational wrongdoing, which in some settings has been normalised to the point that if nurses blow the whistle on poor practices or unacceptable workplace behaviours, they can find themselves targeted and victimised (Hutchinson et al., 2006a; Jackson et al., 2010a; 2010b; Jackson, Peters, et al., 2011).

Bullying is understood to be a problem area both in nursing and in the wider community, particularly in schools and workplaces (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2012; Cross et al., 2009). It has been noted in the literature that the internet also represents a site of bullying that is very concerning (Andrew, Cleary, & Jackson, 2012; Cross et al., 2009). Workplace incivility can also be seen as an aspect of bullying. It in some ways involves behaviour that is much more subtle than bullying but can be seen in how people interact and communicate with one another. Like more overt bullying, it is particularly evident with communication in an electronic age. Behaviours such as blind copying, or copying

others in an intimidatory way into what should be (or is thought to be) private email communication are some of the behaviours that are quite wide spread in some institutions, and can contribute to a negative workplace environment and reduced trust in colleagues.

This leads us to the concept of collegial trust; described as 'a form of personal trust that relates to our colleagues' and the actions and behaviours we can reasonably expect of them (Jackson, 2008). Trusting collegial relationships can contribute enormously to positive and generative working environments that are characterised by constructive and respectful interactions among colleagues who are prepared to share resources, commit to common objectives, and work in a coordinated manner. However, such relationships can only really flourish in environments in which there is a level of ethical sensitivity. Honesty and respect have been associated with collegial trust, while behaviours such as corrupt behaviour and dishonesty are associated with breaches of trust (Jackson, 2008). Breaches of trust can take many forms when working with colleagues with low ethical sensitivity. Such breaches not only erode confidence and trust, but lead to questions about the integrity of people and organisations that permit such behaviours to perpetuate (Cleary, Jackson, & Walter, 2012).

In the final analysis, the quality of our workplaces are the responsibility of all of us. Clearly, we do all have the right to be treated with respect in the workplace and this right is acknowledged in many workplace codes of conduct. We all owe it to ourselves, our colleagues, our clients, families/carers and students to actively contribute to the creation of ethical environments; to resist normalising poor behaviour in the workplace, to challenge poor ethical behaviour when we see it, and to try to be the colleague we want to have in our everyday workplace; in other words, to develop and practice a high level of ethical sensitivity in ourselves and others. Creating a workplace where there is commitment and connection, and relationships are viewed positively not only supports job satisfaction, but also supports a professionally rewarding career, which may in part compensate for everyday frustrations that are a reality of any setting (Phillips, 2009).

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