



JUDGEMENT



LEADERSHIP insights

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Consider this example: Your employee frequently arrives late to meetings, often without the materials they need for full participation or assignments completed. Might your reflex judgment be that they are disorganized and unprofessional? You need to address the behaviors but if your judgments are front and center, you set the stage for defensiveness.

We judge quickly and often unconsciously. Understanding this judgment - that happens before we even realize it - matters both in leading employees and in driving the patient experience. In a recent conversation with Dr. John McAuliffe, a Sauk City physician and leader in addressing the opioid epidemic, we discussed strategies to communicate meaningfully with patients having a mighty struggle with pain and addiction. He said that if we want to communicate effectively and establish relationship-based care we have to, **"throw judgment out of the equation."** Perfectly stated, but difficult for humans to execute.

What drives this habit of judging?

Judging is a shortcut. Our brains look for a fast, familiar assessment, and we start with ourselves: I'm great or terrible. Smart/stupid. Fit/Sloth. While quick judgment is our brain's way of keeping pace with the overload of input we are filtering, it misses registering the breadth of the actual truth. We have great and terrible *moments*, but many more in-between moments that we can learn from. We miss a lot if we act and speak from our automatic reaction rather than pausing for thoughtful consideration of a situation.

It can feel safer to be the boss. Humans have a desire to be right and to find opportunities to control in uncertainty. The more ambiguous things are, the more likely we are to grasp for control in situations and relationships. Judgment fosters that feeling of decisive control that, at least initially, keeps the dragons of the unknown at bay.

We are hired for our judgment. Part of why you are chosen to lead is for your good judgment, so it is natural that the line on when to judge and when not to can blur. But the kind of judgment we are hired to lead with shows up as **weighing all sides, consideration for the needs of others, stewardship of resources, and a responsibility toward the greater good.** Our ego

can get in the way if are not mindful of it, and we end up practicing unhelpful judgment rather than compassionate accountability.

Prevent judgment from interfering in your leadership by:

Owning it. Start to pay attention to when you are judging and catch yourself. Admit, "Yes, I am judging this person right now. This won't help. I will put my judgment on a shelf and see this differently, from their point of view, from an objective stance, from all the facts." Ask a friend to tell you what your face is saying because judgment shows up there before we even speak.

Admitting and accepting that there are things you don't know. Say to yourself, "There is always more to the story." That doesn't mean we ignore bad behavior, but it does mean we address it from a place of compassion if we want to have any impact at all with patients, employees, anyone.

Being gracious if someone calls you out on your judgmental approach. I recently failed at this. My initial response to the feedback was, "No, I'm not being judgmental," then proceeding to justify my position with all the excuses I could think of. The more I justified the more I heard myself trying to slip out of accountability. Listen for when you justify and you might find your way to the source of your judgment. I did, and it was actually a relief to admit it, apologize, and ask to start over.

The times we are currently in, with all the ambiguity and fears, are ripe for passing judgment. Where do you find yourself judging and how could you better serve those situations? What are your opportunities to coach your employees on how judgment interferes with their effectiveness? Preventing judgment is not just a "nice to do" in healthcare. It regularly shows up in patient care and it interferes with quality outcomes. Patients can sense if you think of them as the "frequent flier." They feel it when you see them as demanding or are looking negatively on their clothing, tattoos, parenting behaviors, etc. Help employees to recognize where they have opportunities to suspend judgment and approach every patient, every time, with its opposite: *Compassion.*