



# The Little Things

## Creating a Positive Nursing Environment

BY GENEVIÈVE M. CLAVREUL, RN, PHD

**CONTRARY TO POPULAR BELIEF, IT MAY** not be the big things that cause people to abandon their life-long career aspirations; rather, it is often the cumulative result of a lot of little insults that finally wears out their soul. When we examine why nurses leave the profession, this may be the case.

One night I was working one of my usual 12-hour graveyard shifts, and as

was my custom, I arrived early so I wouldn't have to rush. I found a comfortable seat in the nurses' lounge and was reading one of the nursing magazines on the table (this was before *Working Nurse* came on the scene). As I flipped through the pages, I heard the door open and one of the other nurses entered the lounge. We exchanged pleasantries and then she spied the nursing

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magazine. "Why are you reading that piece of trash?" she exclaimed. "I usually just throw it out."

My curiosity was piqued and I asked if she would share with me her reasons for doing so, and her response was enlightening. "Well," she began, "one of the nurses who is a key member of that magazine's editorial board was the Chief Nursing Officer at a hospital where I used to work, and she single-handedly destroyed the nursing staff there!"

"Surely you can't mean that?" I asked, surprised.

"Don't believe me," she responded, "just ask any nurse working there and they'll tell you the same thing. None of us will read that magazine so long as her name is associated with it."

She said this with such authority and passion that I couldn't resist the challenge and did indeed begin to quiz the various nurses. Though I must say her opinion was not unanimously shared by *every* nurse, enough nurses concurred and expressed the same disgust with the former CNO that a reasonable person would have to say her assertion was true.

**No single nurse could cite** what horrible things the CNO had done to "destroy" the nursing staff, but they all remembered one fateful National Nurses Week celebration. The story went something like this: The CNO was relatively new in the position and Nurses Week was fast approaching. Since she was the CNO it fell to her to plan an appropriate "thank you" for the nursing staff. In the past the hospital had always recognized contributions in a way that wasn't flashy but that made the nurses feel appreciated by the hospital administration. Until that year. The thank you token that so many remember to this day? Each nurse was given a lawn sign, much like a political candidate would use, for them to place in their front yard. The slogan printed on the front read, "A Nurse From \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital Lives Here." Needless to say, this idea went over like a lead balloon.

Many reading would be quick to conclude that this could not be the only thing that caused this CNO to be so disliked; and in all likelihood, you would be correct. There were likely other even more egregious things that she did, but it was this "little thing" that proved to be the tipping point.

In an intimate setting such as the hospital unit, nurses often accept the big challenges as just part of the job; the stress, the overtime, the politics all come with the territory. However, when little insults begin to accumulate on top of big challenges, then a pressure point builds until just one more little thing sets off a chain of events that may leave people scratching their heads, wondering what just happened. This behavior may be described as "gunny sacking."

We take the little thing, stuff it in the sack and hope the feeling it evokes will go away, which of course it doesn't. One just continues to stuff more and more of these little grievances into the sack until it can hold no more and bursts. The end result is usually a response that appears disproportionate to the tipping point event.

**No work environment is perfect**, because where numerous people are constantly interacting, conflicts can and do arise. The goal is to create a nursing environment where minor conflicts don't explode because team members know that they can express their concerns and frustrations in safety and confidence. Many would point to management's responsibility for staff morale, and, in great part, this would be a correct assessment. However, the individual nurses must take responsibility as well. Everyone needs to be committed to creating a workplace where "little things" are not allowed to fester until the last nerve has fired off, causing a reaction disproportionate to the event.

A manager should never minimize the devastating effect that a build up of annoying little things can have on a staff. Also, they should never underestimate the power that offering positive reinforcement can have on the nursing staff. When a nursing team makes the effort to provide opportunities for positive experiences, everyone benefits. These constructive moments can range from bringing in food to be shared by the team (most cultures celebrate by convening over a meal), bringing in flowers from the garden or farmer's market to brighten up the nurses' lounge or common area, or commenting on a teammate's new hairdo. Any gesture of goodwill does a lot to raise the spirit of a team.

When I was the Director of Nursing, I tried to take note of various positive contributions that each nurse on my staff exhibited. At Christmas time I made sure that each nurse on my staff received a card that was hand addressed with a personal note. I made an effort to compliment those whom I had observed doing something positive or constructive, performing above and beyond the call of duty.

The "little things" work both ways. They can make a nurse so unhappy that she refuses to read a magazine that contains the name of an offending CNO; or they can make a nurse feel so appreciated that she goes the extra mile, raising the spirit of the entire nursing staff. **WN**



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