

## To 'walk the talk' takes commitment, resolve



**Recently, I have** had several occasions to think about the meaning of an old saying: You've got to walk the talk. There are two particular experiences that I want to share with you. Both occurred in the context of the work I do on your behalf. And both caused me to stop and think about whether I am personally 'walking the talk.'

The first situation involved a nurse manager who was considering changing jobs because of a difficult workplace culture. She was struggling to decide whether to risk going or to risk staying. As she considered the relative risks of either course of action, she said to me with true pain in her voice: "How can anyone who says they value a quality workplace allow, much less demand, what is going on here?"

It was a good question, and one that should give many of us pause. Unreasonable spans of control (or patient assignments), unending overtime, the exhaustion that comes with overtime; these were all daily experiences for this nurse – experiences that in no way reflect the promise of a quality workplace that appears in so many corporate statements. Where was the action to support those statements?

The second situation arose not long ago, when I was asked about my availability for a Saturday evening event. Accepting the invitation would have seen me away from home for a fourth night in a row that week. I didn't want to say 'yes' but I do have a hard time saying 'no.' I bought some time with 'let me think about it.'

I realized that whatever guilt I might feel about saying 'no' was small in comparison to the relief I would feel about saying 'no' for the right reasons. My answer was aided by a supportive email from our executive director saying "don't push

yourself unless you really want to attend, as we can find someone else."

This experience left me wondering if, for too many of us, leadership has become a sort of "giving one's all, all of the time" thing. If it has, we are doomed to fail because that goal is simply not achievable within the context of the principles that we espouse in our quality worklife documents. Guilt at saying 'no' is just one more habit for many of us. I need to break my habit. Do you?

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I speak often with colleagues and with students about the need to create balance, about the value of a positive work culture, and about the need to re-charge if one is going to be at one's best. Yet, here I was about to make (again) the monumental error of not acting in accordance with my values. For these reasons I declined the invitation. I probably missed a lovely evening and fine wine, but I happily traded

that for a quiet hamburger at home. More importantly, I created some space in my life away from both paid and volunteer work that is all about the balance that I talk about valuing.

This is not intended to be some sort of excuse for those who never 'do,' or to give some sort of value to lack of effort or quality of work. Rather, it is meant to signal that there is a time and place when we each have to make a decision that supports our own health and healthy worklife. To do less is to devalue the importance of those things we claim to hold dear by failing to 'walk the talk.' We also fail to learn from and model RNAO's healthy work environments best practice guidelines. This creates a fundamental disconnect between our values and our actions.

There are examples everywhere of individuals, including but absolutely not limited to formal leaders, who act every day in every way to demonstrate their stated values in action. In true human fashion, however, the opposite is equally true. There are examples everywhere of situations where what is said and what is done do not align.

We must remember that no number of philosophies, no set of values on a wall, will ever have the power of individual personal leadership in the fight to improve quality in our workplaces and our lives. It is not enough to leave improvement to those with formal leadership roles, albeit they are absolutely critical to our success in this area.

Beyond our formal roles, whatever they may be, each of us is challenged to start with personal leadership. To ensure that our individual actions reflect our stated values. To further our collective work for healthy work environments by assessing our own behaviours and modeling our values in action.

Time to walk the talk. **RN**

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