You are the primary individual responsible for your career. It is yours. You inhabit your career from your student years to your wisdom years, and whether you are taking your first steps, full of potential, or are a giant in the industry, there are 4 aspects of work you should never neglect as a leader, or follower, because the consequence of failure is high. Do what you can to avoid failures in R.I.S.C.: regulatory, integrity, safety, and core purpose. Problems in these areas change career paths and will often mean a setback and “negative headlines” about you. If results go wrong in 1 of these 4 areas, you could find you are affected, having fewer options and decreased ability to lead. The impact of failure in these 4 areas is likely to be greater and recovery more difficult than failures in any other area.
You may have a personal story. Perhaps you remember a close call or a painful event that changed the trajectory of your career. We probably all know more than one colleague whose employment, progression, or reputation was affected by a regulatory, integrity, safety, or core purpose disappointment.

Together, we have witnessed cautionary tales play out on a world stage with massive media coverage and a judgmental public eye. These unhappy events defeat admired transformational leaders and affect the way they are viewed by their contemporaries and by history. There have been oil spills rooted in exceeding limits of safe performance, scandalous undoing, a call for tighter regulatory oversight post-calamity, and dropped balls with global economic consequences. Table 1 explores situations nurse leaders regularly face.

**REGULATORY**

*Follow the Rules*

Regulations touch every aspect of health care. Regulatory bodies share our intention to protect the public, and that is reason enough for organizations and leaders to prioritize meeting standards, every time. Patients, payers, providers, and politicians want healthcare quality and safety. Alignment toward those we serve is why failure in this aspect of leading has serious consequences.

Whether through your actions, inaction, or misfortune, being found to not meet standards in your areas of responsibility is painful professionally and can have lasting consequences. Penalties are increasing, and oversight by Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is evolving.

Newer leaders may need a story to understand the role of misfortune. Here is a fictional example: manufacturer guidelines say you must wait 2 seconds before interpreting the results of a point-of-care dipstick test. Two seconds is less time than it takes to rotate the device and view the interpretation window, so staff tells a surveyor to check the test “immediately.” Several staff say “immediately,” and your department generates an immediate jeopardy finding for not following manufacturer guidelines to wait 2 seconds.

A new leader may not understand that when there are intrinsic motivations to be safer and have better quality, does regulatory activity have to be complicated? There is no perfect answer, but when managing your career by learning to work with the complexity and frame regulatory work through a patient-centric lens helps.

Another way to manage regulatory risk through your career is to view regulations as a threshold, which is what they are: Go beyond; establish the leverage data collection, aggregation, analytics, and reporting methods. Identify, disseminate, and adopt practices that produce outcomes better than what is provided by the standards. Over time, strive to make today’s best practices become tomorrow’s standard of care by raising both aspirational bars, centers of excellence, regulatory bars, and internal standards.

**INTEGRITY**

*Leaders Are Observed—360 Degrees*

Integrity has many definitions. Leader behavioral integrity is employees’ perceptions of their leader’s “word–deed alignment.” Leader behavioral integrity is positively associated with intent to stay. Some wisdom leaders say integrity is defined by how you behave when no one is looking. Both definitions work for managing your career because integrity is about how you behave, and leadership is often heavily affected by how others perceive you.

Integrity is rarely self-righteous and typically looks more humble than bold. Most of us know when we are acting with integrity and when we are not. We also know for ourselves when someone else is and is not acting with integrity. Serious integrity failures such as kickbacks, lying, and sexual harassment rarely go from zero to full-blown egregious behavior. The individual likely took small steps toward the abyss. Small acts of misleading, minor boundary pushing, and accepting increasingly unethical gifts leading to a larger and larger gap between the behavior and what is professional/ethical.

Last, when helping newer leaders and ourselves, it may help to share, without being cynical, that history shows people will let others wander into the abyss of integrity failures to make room for their ambitions, removing you as competition. That expression, “let them cut their own throat” or “pull out the popcorn and watch” comes from this political tactic. We are personally responsible for our integrity. The moment we outsource our concept of ethical standards to other people, we are putting our most valuable assets at risk. Nobody will guard your integrity but you.

**SAFETY**

*See Something—Do Something*

Patients are the most vulnerable people entering your organization because they are putting themselves in your hands. A failure in safety where there is harm changes the people around the event. Career trajectories change, not only because of external options and pressures, but also because the individuals who feel responsible may be unable or unwilling to take on the risk of caring or leading care again.

Employees, vendors, contractors, students, visitors, patients, and everyone else expect to come to your organization without being harmed, robbed, abused, assaulted, trapped, discriminated against, or otherwise treated without the highest regard for physical and emotional safety. The public expects the staff members they encounter to be ready to perform their role with a high level of proficiency.

Creating and sustaining a culture of safety requires leaders to develop a foundational knowledge of safety science and commit to application. Preoccupation with failure is a quality found in high-reliability organizations; recognizing everyday harm is a possibility. Celebrate good catches and days with zero harm.

Involves the recipients of health care in a safe environment through education and patient/family advisory roles. In meetings with frontline leaders, ask about where the next harm will occur.
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