

# Dialing down drama at work

Model the behavior you want to see in your staff.

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

**WHEN** Janet\* accepted a director position in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) that's part of a well-known academic medical center, the last thing she expected was to find a unit culture full of drama, gossip, and cliques. She's discovered that several of the most experienced nurses in the NICU play a major role in escalating tensions. The behaviors remind Janet of being in high school, and they aren't congruent with the organization's culture. Not surprisingly, staff turnover is higher than in other departments. Although Janet is new in her role

and to the organization, she understands that she must act quickly to change staff perceptions and create a drama-free environment.

Janet's story is a good illustration of how workplace drama left unchecked can infiltrate even the best organizations. Like Janet, many nurse leaders assume they have a professional and mature workforce. After all, healthcare has enough drama without manufacturing it. But humans are emotional, and drama kings and queens exist in every profession. They revel in negativity and rumors. Cy Wakeman, a leading expert in workplace drama, explores how staff like those in this NICU are "emotionally expensive" to organizations. Her research indicates that the average staff member



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spends up to 2.5 hours a day distracted by dramatic coworkers. She cautions that when confronted with difficult situations, drama kings and queens get caught up in their egos and don't try to realistically reframe what's occurring. When this happens, group energy, which could be harnessed to solve problems and meet patient needs, is instead focused on creating drama.

High levels of emotional drama erode trust and contribute to a lack of psychological safety, making staff less likely to share challenges and be vulnerable. Janet recognizes that the drama level she tolerates will directly impact her team's success, performance, and resiliency.

### Spotting drama in the workplace

Assessing the drama level in a unit's culture takes time and leader attentiveness. Culture is described as the invisible architecture of a unit or organization. It's a compilation of values, behaviors, actions, and group norms that ultimately becomes the operating system (to use a technology metaphor). Janet wasn't aware of the NICU's drama during the interview process because drama kings and queens typically mask their behaviors with new leaders, and the staff who don't engage in the behavior frequently accept it as normal because prior leaders didn't confront it. Staff turnover probably was the first clue for Janet that something was wrong.

Wakeman observes that drama occurs when staff distort reality into a self-serving story to gain approval and validation. Janet can gain insight into the unit's drama level by observing for staff who:

- have an unhealthy need for significance and achieve it with dramatic stories
- frequently share bad news, thrive in adverse events, and talk about "unit unhappiness"
- gossip and perpetuate rumors that aren't grounded in facts
- have a pessimistic attitude and react with catastrophic thinking to unit or organizational changes
- lack professional accountability and blame others.

To successfully quash drama in the environment, Wakeman recommends that leaders adopt a "reality-based" leadership approach. Janet will need to set different expectations in the NICU and empower staff to take owner-

ship of new behavioral standards that eliminate storytelling not grounded in reality.

### Steps for dialing down the drama

Leadership experts Kouzes and Posner have identified "modeling the way" as one of five exemplary practices of the best leaders. Modeling the way is fundamental because it allows leaders to earn, sustain, and build credibility. Leaders should serve as beacons for others to follow, so Janet must adopt a no-drama approach in her leadership.

**1. Don't participate in discussions with staff that aren't grounded in reality.** Team members will take their cues from Janet. If she doesn't seek multiple viewpoints in a story, she could get sucked into the drama. If she gossips, reacts strongly to difficult news, is frequently in crisis mode, or regularly has interpersonal conflicts, she'll see that behavior in her team. But if she's calm, cultivates a sense that everyone is on the same side, doesn't overreact, doesn't gossip, and takes a low-key approach to office politics and interpersonal relationships, she'll reinforce the behaviors she wants from staff.

**2. Provide coaching to the drama kings and queens.** Coaching toward new behaviors will play a key role in dialing down the drama. Janet will need to call out problematic behavior using specific examples she observes. When a staff member is gossiping or sharing stories, Janet might consider asking these questions developed by Wakeman to help him or her reflect on the behavior:

- How do you know that your assumptions in this situation are true?
- How is your behavior contributing to what's happening here?
- What ideas do you have for resolving this situation?
- How can you help improve this situation?
- What would "great" look like now?

Drama kings and queens must be reminded that venting doesn't help resolve issues and that creating doubts and chaos leads to a victim mentality that doesn't empower staff. Reflective questioning can help those participating in the behavior get a clearer picture of how others experience it.

**3. Establish new behavioral expectations and team values.** Behavior comes from perspectives and values we may not be aware of until we encounter someone who thinks differently than we do. In addition to calling out

problematic behavior when she sees it, Janet also must be explicit about her expectations. One way to do this is to create new team norms around low drama and assuming positive intent. These new values could include the following:

- Don't engage in gossiping about others.
- Confirm that information and stories are reality-based before telling them.
- Practice empathy and demonstrate good intentions toward others.
- Assume accountability for own behavior and don't participate in the blame game.
- Adopt a solutions-focused approach.

### Fostering harmony and teamwork

Humans are emotional by nature, and where you have emotion you frequently get gossip and drama. Some staff will seek attention by further stirring the emotional pot. Building a culture of accountability with minimal emotional drama is a crucial element to organizational success. In healthcare, much more is at stake than annoying behavior. High drama environments aren't healthy and don't promote effective teamwork. When these environments exist, leaders like

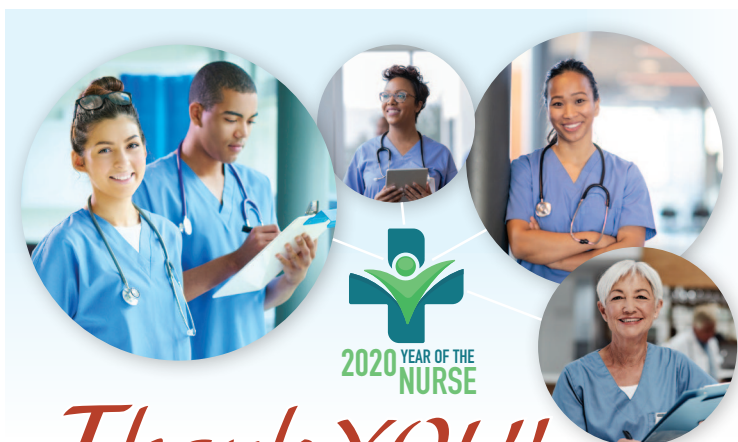
Janet must take action. Creating a culture that fosters harmony and teamwork begins with a leader defining what that means. When leaders reinforce new values and confront old behaviors, drama can be stopped cold. **AN**

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\*Name is fictitious.

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