“How do we prepare our rising stars to deal with inflexibility?”

I was invited to speak to undergraduates this week to promote postgraduate studies – an enjoyable task, as they were very keen. They took time out of their dissertation-writing to hear about how to advance their careers. How exciting to be among bright, enthusiastic people entering our profession, with a career of nursing ahead of them. Yet part of me felt sad that they will have to fit their ideas and altruistic intentions into what can often be a hierarchy of autocratic, inflexible management.

How do we prepare our rising stars to navigate their way through a minefield of gatekeepers with hidden agendas? Not to mention surviving the toxic bullying cultures that exist in some nursing teams.

Historically, nursing has been a hierarchical profession. And having to work 24 hours a day means nurses must decide between family time and work. But why should it be like this? Surely a 24/7 service can lend itself to flexibility and the offering of set hours to those needing to accommodate childcare (and often older-parent care) alongside their working life.

Nurses also need time away from the bedside to pursue knowledge. Encouraging further study requires managers to be flexible, otherwise how will we promote nursing and clinical academic careers, as well as embedding evidence into practice?

It appears that those in positions of power – from government to managers, matrons and ward sisters – who so often slip into the role of gatekeepers, have the keys to the kingdom. They are in a position to set the tone of organisational culture. They can demand certain ways of working, enforce rigid work patterns, demand flexibility and total commitment to the service, or choose to nurture that most transient, immeasurable and fragile of worker qualities: goodwill. I suspect that nurses who feel physically and emotionally supported give better care.

Top-down management and rigid rules do not always create the desired response. Staff will leave or find creative ways to survive the crushing effects of control.

Bullying occurs in all professions, even nursing. We must find ways to address these issues and support each other if we’re to improve patient care and promote nursing, especially among the newcomers to our profession, who need support and kindness. After all, who would want to institutionalise them into poor habits and insidious unspoken rules, based not on evidence, but on sinister agendas? Thankfully, new ways forward are emerging – clinical academic careers in nursing, shared governance and frontline leadership strategies, to name but a few.

Balancing different agendas can be a challenge – managers are pressured to deliver services under exceptionally difficult circumstances for long periods, amid unprecedented demands on healthcare.

We need to stop, look up and see the horizon. We can, as a profession, control our own agenda if we stick together. But first, and for the sake of our patients and ourselves, we must discover what that agenda is. So who controls your agenda?

Liz Charalambous is staff nurse, Nottingham University Hospitals Trust, and a PhD student at the University of Nottingham

Eileen Shepherd is clinical editor of Nursing Times.
eileen.shepherd@emap.com
Twitter @EileenShepherd. Don’t miss the practice blog, go to nursingtimes.net/practiceblog