

Respect & Dignity

Month 3 Leadership Challenge

Purpose

To strengthen belonging, professional identity, and performance by practicing consistent respect—treating people as inherently valuable and creating conditions where they can grow into stronger versions of themselves.

Why This Matters

Respect from leadership is one of the strongest modifiable predictors of physician burnout and professional fulfillment. Resident physicians who felt treated with respect reported a burnout rate of 28.3%, compared to 60.6% among those who did not—and organizational satisfaction nearly doubled (from 48.5% to 92.9%) when they felt respected by their leadership team. Broader research reinforces this: 80% of employees treated disrespectfully spend significant work time ruminating on the behavior and 48% deliberately reduce their effort. In healthcare, that withdrawal erodes clinical engagement, team cohesion, and patient safety. Disrespect also cascades—leadership behaviors are mimicked throughout organizations, spreading incivility to peers, learners, and patients.

Respect also functions as a catalyst for professional growth. Because people's jobs are central to their identity, respectful cues from leaders are powerful signals of social worth. Respect fosters psychological safety, and it is not a finite resource—it can be extended to every team member without diminishing what is available for others. When leaders embed respect into how they already lead, they create conditions where physicians and their teams can flourish.

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Respect vs. Recognition

This challenge focuses on **respect**, which is distinct from **recognition**:

Respect signals worth and belonging—"you matter as a person here." It's ongoing and embedded in daily interactions. It shapes identity: "I belong."

Recognition signals achievement—"you did something well." It's event-based and reinforces specific behaviors. It shapes motivation: "Do more of that."

Your Challenge

Within the next 7 days, intentionally practice two visible respect behaviors:

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1. **One that reinforces baseline dignity** for all team members—signaling that every person has inherent value and belongs, regardless of role or output.
2. **One that supports someone's professional identity or growth**—treating them as a capable professional in ways that help them see themselves differently.

These actions should occur during real, everyday interactions. See examples below.

Guidelines

- Choose behaviors that fit naturally into your existing workflow (rounds, huddles, handoffs, teaching sessions, one-on-ones).
- The goal is consistency, not grand gestures. Respect is embedded in *how* you do what you're already doing.
- Respect is not a fixed resource. Giving it to one person does not diminish what's available for others.
- By the end of the week, observe any changes in how people engage, collaborate, or carry themselves.

Examples: Baseline Dignity (for everyone)

- Acknowledge and greet all team members by name—physicians, APPs, nurses, techs, coordinators, and support staff alike.
- Listen fully without interruption—especially when someone lower in the hierarchy is speaking.
- Ask for input before giving direction. Signal that perspectives matter, not just compliance.
- Model civility and calm during high-acuity moments. Disrespect spreads fastest under pressure.
- Minimize visible status differences—sit at the same table, use names not titles, make eye contact with everyone in the room.

Examples: Professional Identity & Growth

- Express confidence in someone's ability to handle an assignment—and give them room to try.
- Ask someone to teach or explain something to peers, signaling that their expertise is valued.
- Refer to someone's development trajectory—"You've grown a lot in this area"—so they see their own progress.
- Treat a trainee or junior colleague as a future peer, not just a learner to be corrected.
- When someone tries a new behavior or takes a risk, validate the attempt—help them move from "this feels odd" to "maybe this is really me."

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Key Concepts

Respect Drives Performance: Employees who feel respected are more satisfied, more resilient, more cooperative, and perform better. Disrespect has the opposite effect—research shows 80% of employees treated disrespectfully spend significant time ruminating, and 48% deliberately reduce their effort.

Respect Shapes Identity: People join organizations hoping to grow and become better versions of themselves. Respect is a feedback mechanism that validates that growth. When leaders treat someone as capable and valuable, it helps that person cement new professional behaviors and identities.

Respect Cascades: Leadership behaviors are mimicked throughout organizations. The way you treat your team shapes how they treat each other, learners, and patients. Disrespect spirals—and so does respect.

Reflection Questions

After completing the challenge, reflect on the following:

1. Did you observe any changes in how people engaged, collaborated, or carried themselves?
2. What felt natural—and what felt uncomfortable or awkward?
3. Where might your leadership habits unintentionally signal disrespect—especially to those lower in the hierarchy?
4. Did you notice anyone growing or carrying themselves differently because of how you treated them?
5. How might your respect behaviors be rippling through the team—to peers, learners, or patients?
6. What is one respect behavior you will continue beyond this week?