

From the President's Desk

A fear-free workplace

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September 2023—In the past two years, I've written a lot in this column about leadership and why pathologists make natural health care leaders. Effective leaders emerge from a process of continual self-correction in those who constantly seek out new ideas and hone their leadership skills.

Lately I've been listening to and reading some work by Cy Wakeman, an author and speaker who promotes what she calls reality-based leadership. She says that a leader's main job is to remove fear. When I first heard that, I was dubious. Isn't a little bit of fear a good thing? Doesn't fear drive accountability?

But I've become convinced that fear in the workplace is a useless and destructive emotion. It does not drive people to succeed; instead, it prevents people from thriving in their roles. We all experience fear in our jobs from time to time, and I think if we're honest with ourselves, we can agree that it is overall a hindrance rather than a motivator.

Thinking about fear at work reminds me of the importance of managing our internal environment. I have spent years honing the skill of pausing before reacting to a stressful situation. It's not about masking anger or fear; it's about having the personal clarity and self-control to be able to identify when I am experiencing stress during an interaction and then being able to pause and reframe in order to neutralize a spicy internal reaction.



Dr. Volk

That's a skill I need just as much now as I did earlier in my career. For example, when a colleague blames my team for something, it's only natural to feel anger start to build up. I have to remember that at its root anger is driven by an underlying fear.

By pausing before responding, I have a moment to try to understand my anxiety. When I ask myself what is frightening about a particular situation, or why I feel threatened, I can gain a tremendous amount of clarity. I've been most successful in getting to a solution when I can dissect and defuse the fear. Then I can focus on the mission of doing the best work possible for our patients.

In my own career, I have seen just how valuable it is to overcome fear and find more effective motivation. As leaders, if we can eliminate fear for the people who report to us, we can improve our chances of success across the board. When folks don't have to be afraid at their jobs, they can honestly tell leaders what's going on—they can report problems, flag potential issues, or admit mistakes without having to worry about reprimand or retribution. Without a fear-free environment, leaders will not get the full story of what's going on in their organizations. Problems can take root and spread if we don't have the insight we need to fix them.

As leaders, we have the opportunity to model how to deal with frustration, anger, anxiety, and other negative emotions in the workplace to help give our teammates the tools to deal with their own issues. We also have the

responsibility to dig in when problems do arise—to be willing to turn over the rocks and see what's underneath so we can fix it. It's the only way to achieve lasting solutions and to create real trust among a team.

As I sign off from this column and from my term as president of the CAP, I want to tell you what an honor it has been to serve my fellow pathologists in this role. I am grateful to my fellow CAP members for electing me to this position, to my family for their support, and to my colleagues and mentors for their assistance.

It is a real pleasure to know that we will all be represented next by Donald Karcher, MD. I have had the pleasure of working with Dr. Karcher not only in his role as president-elect during the past two years but for several years before that as vice chair to his chair on the Council on Government Affairs. I know that he is absolutely dedicated to the CAP and the success of the profession. He will do an amazing job as our next president, and I wish him all the best.

Dr. Volk welcomes communication from CAP members. Write to her at president@cap.org.