

## Admitting mistakes



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The physician is captain of the ship, and demonstrations of leader humility and the ability to admit mistakes helps to foster a climate of patient safety where causes of error can be addressed in a nonpunitive fashion. All members of the care team should feel empowered to call out patient safety hazards, and patient safety should come before pride and ego. Health care professionals might not report errors for fear of retribution, including the loss of professional licensure. This lack of reporting can result in further patient harm if the root causes of the mistake are not corrected. Just culture has been proposed as a means of facilitating discussion of medical errors and managing fear of retribution.<sup>1</sup> A culture of patient safety starts at the top. In a study of leader humility, Hu et al identified key characteristics essential to foster honesty and team creativity.<sup>2</sup> These included being open to admitting limitations and mistakes and giving appropriate credit to others. They demonstrated a positive relationship between leader humility and information sharing within a team.<sup>2</sup>

Professionalism is now identified as a key competency during residency training. Many programs include a dedicated professionalism curriculum, but data suggest that residents can identify unprofessional behavior and still engage in it.<sup>3</sup> The challenge is the transition from knowledge to culture. Peer evaluations and 360° feedback evaluations can help, and annual self-assessments are associated with improvements in professionalism.<sup>4</sup>

Admitting mistakes is never easy, but when correcting the medical literature is involved, admitting mistakes is especially important.<sup>5</sup> We base important therapeutic decisions on published articles, and bad data can result in bad outcomes. When flaws in a study are identified, there is a strong tendency for authors to defend their methods and data when the best response might be to admit the limitations of the study and suggest improvements for further studies. A culture shift is needed, and we should applaud authors willing to engage in candid discussions of the limitations of their work. It is not a badge of shame to admit error; it's a badge of honor and professionalism.

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