



INTEGRITY IN THE WORKPLACE

by Kathy Young

At my place of business we speak about integrity all of the time. It comes up in our monthly meetings, and we talk about it when counseling an employee. We present it when we initially hire someone. We evaluate, as much as possible, whether a new hire has the integrity we are seeking for our team. Integrity is wrapped up in what we call the "work ethic." As an employer, I find what I am looking for in an employee as far as integrity, as difficult to define. But in the end, it is the most important characteristic of a team member. Most of my Employee Handbook is spent defining integrity and what is expected of each person.

In my experience I have rarely fired someone for their lack of knowledge of billing and coding. But I have fired several who revealed themselves as people of little integrity in the workplace. If people are going to be held accountable for their integrity, then we need to know what it is and why it is so important in the workplace.

In medical billing we talk about integrity all of the time. But have we ever thought about what it really is? There are many definitions of integrity. Wikipedia defines it as "consistency of actions, values, methods, measures, principles, expectations and outcome." It is also defined as "moral soundness." I have often stated that "Integrity is doing the right thing when no one is looking." But in a world of situational ethics, true integrity and what it means in the workplace has gotten lost.

What is the definition of situation ethics? I could not possibly fully define that here, but the short version would be that my actions and beliefs in right and wrong are not determined by what I know is absolute, but rather is based on the situation at hand. In other words, it may be wrong for me to lie but in some forms of business it is not only okay, it is expected. Therefore, the situation requires me to bend the truth as I determine the situation requires.

In medical billing we are held to the truth that is found in the documentation. If the doctor did not document it then I cannot bill for it. That is the end of that. But we often tell ourselves, "He meant to write that, he just forgot." Integrity would remind us that we cannot bill for it if it is not written down. I want to be the person who chooses right. Many of the rules and laws around us are there because people tend to choose ethics based on their situation. This kind of thinking can cause a biller to lose their job or even spend time behind bars.

As an employer, it is rarely the big things that cause the problems between management and the employee. It is all rolled together in the little things. These are the things that make us say, "it was only 5 minutes," or "other people do it all the time" or "I did not think it would be noticed."

Let's take a moment and look at a few things that can make the difference in maintaining your integrity in your place of employment.

Stealing Time

Perhaps the person might be sitting at her desk texting on her phone. If a person sends text messages for a total of 5 minutes each day, that would be 25 minutes per week and 1300 minutes per year. At a payment rate of \$.25 per minute a person would be stealing from their employer \$325.00 per year.

Bad Mouthing Your Employer

When we choose to vent our frustrations in a public place, this not only causes a defamation of your employer but also the business itself. The Department of Labor has determined that even if you are venting about your employer on Facebook, MySpace or any other blog, you have now taken your frustration public and you can be held accountable for this. In other words, if your employer sees the blog, you could get fired.

Confidentiality

It is easy for me, the employer, to say to the employee not to share their salary pay rate with others. But this is difficult to keep from occurring. The results of talking salary amongst employees are that the information is confidential and the knowledge of each other's wage can cause anger and disloyalty.

Wasting time

Wasting time can be seen when you clock in. Do you start your work right away, or do you now go and make the coffee, talk to others about their weekend, pour a cup of coffee then go to your desk to work? I watch employees waste more than 15 minutes each morning in just getting them situated before they work. Some even as much as 30 minutes of wasted time. At 15 minutes wasted, using a rate of \$15.00 per hour, stealing money by wasting time calculates out to \$1,950.00 per year. Or look at it this way, about \$.93 per hour. That could be your raise of almost 1.00 per hour.

The lack of integrity is costly. It costs the employer and the employee.

It is also interesting to note that when I market my billing company, a doctor who is unhappy with their current billing company is typically unhappy with their integrity. Revenue is being written off. Appeals are not being made. Promises are not being kept. Follow through is lacking. All of these issues are integrity issues and they are not necessarily just billing concerns. A client begins to feel that something is wrong. Sometimes they miss the mark in evaluating what is wrong with their billing. Sometimes the problem is the medical office itself. But when we, the billing company make a promise to our clients, we must keep those promises or we will be perceived as having no integrity.

Six years ago I spoke at a conference and entitled my lesson "Raising the Standards of Medical Billing." We liked it so much that we made this our tag-line. It is one thing for me to talk about integrity but it is not always easy to live integrity. All people have shortcomings, and we all fail at this thing, but when we are people of integrity we pick ourselves up and we determine to do it better the next time.

All in all this is what I am certain of. I cannot teach integrity. It is a choice. You either want it or you do not. You either see it in your life or you are blinded to it. But a truly successful person is one who walks a walk of integrity to the best of his/her ability. When we live out our lives with higher standards, there is no ceiling to our success. In life, we are always limited by ourselves. No one else limits us unless we have given them permission in our lives. If we have chosen to be people of integrity, the sky is the limit and that is pretty high reaching.