

# Building and Protecting Your Reputation

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*You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do.*

Henry Ford (1863 - 1947), Car Maker

When I first wrote about “Establishing a Professional Identity” (<http://www.thoracic.org/sections/career-development/career-talk/articles/community-building/February-2005.html>), I focused on developing a clinical or research niche. However, over the last few years, as I have sat on committees, developed conferences, and looked for a new job, I've realized that one of the most important aspects about developing a professional identity is building your reputation. How many times have I heard “Well, s/he's a good person”? Everyone will nod their heads in perfect understanding – we expect excellence, but being known for honesty, fairness, and the ability to work with others goes a long way in determining whether or not someone gets recommended for a job or position. What is an “old-boys' network” but a bunch of guys who pass each other's names around?

*Be honest.* Reputations are usually built over months to years, based largely on our actions but sometimes our words as well. And yet, how many of us think about how we are perceived by others as we go about our daily personal and professional lives, e.g., honesty and integrity. We learn to tell “white” lies or half-truths in order to make the process of getting along with others easier. Similarly, we learn not to confront others on every minor transgression, e.g., littering or throwing a cigarette butt on the road. We excuse these acts in the name of socialization and reassure ourselves that we would speak up in the case of something really egregious. But would we? Those of us who bemoan the long and laborious process of institutional review boards (IRBs) and human subject research need only to remember the Tuskegee Institute and syphilis experiments. This extends to people and companies with whom you associate. Is all business just business? Or is it the money that really matters?

*Keep Your Promises.* One thing you quickly find out when you're trying to organize an activity or run a committee is who you can count on to follow through on their commitments. People expect you to know what you can or cannot handle in terms of workload. Learn to say no gracefully, or at least ask to get back to that person after you've had a chance to look at your schedule or talk with your advisor. It is much, much worse to volunteer or agree to participate on a project and then find yourself overextended. You either don't complete your assignment or do a bad job. Sometimes, unexpected obstacles arise. In that case, be sure to communicate your difficulties with the planner as soon as possible so that other arrangements can be made, if necessary.

*Reputations are fragile.* Although reputations should be based on the quality of your work, your thinking and your integrity, recent events involving the governor of New York illustrate how quickly a reputation can be destroyed. Unfortunately, even an unfounded accusation can indelibly stain a career. Recently, I was accused of poor practice and sloppiness in managing my patients. Even though I had worked hard over the last 2 years to establish my practice, the shadow this accusation cast on my reputation for delivering good healthcare and my commitment to my job was very real and threatening. What troubled me especially was how this accusation was presented without a thorough investigation of the facts. But it didn't matter; the damage was done.

*Communicate professionally.* The question for me was how to be aggressive in responding to these questions without seeming overly defensive or dismissive. I was angry, but realized that how I handled the situation was an essential part of the damage control. While I was not going to tolerate unsubstantiated attacks, I needed to carefully listen to determine if there indeed was anything that I needed to improve upon. This also brings up the issue of gossip. Use your judgment; be very careful of how you speak of others. It's one thing to share a juicy story with a close friend, another to develop a reputation as someone who lacks discretion or is unreliable.

The matter turned out to be a misunderstanding and not reflective of my standard of care. But it took me several days to track down the parties involved and to get the facts.

Luckily, people were prepared to hear me out before passing judgment. I like to think that my reputation helped buy me time and understanding while I investigated matters.

*Be fair.* Reputations can also trap you. Even if you consistently favor one viewpoint or another, you need to stop and make yourself think of the other side. Fairly or unfairly, word-of-mouth can stereotype you as a naysayer or nitpicker. Worst case scenario? Marginalization. People stop listening to what you have to say or don't even bother asking for your opinion because they think they already know what you will say. Instead, if you take the time to listen and respectfully address the concerns of those on the opposite side, others will have confidence in your ability to think and to lead.

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