



What makes a nurse a GREAT nurse?

PUBLISHED ON [August 25, 2017](#)

What qualities make a great nurse? Well you will probably hear a wide and diverse range of responses to that question.

When you look through the literature for some sort of guidance you see a lot of stuff about knowledge and emotional intelligence, of being a problem solver, and a critical thinker.

And then there is the 'C' word. Compassion.

As one nurse manager wrote:

“Great nurses are born, not made. They have an innate gift of unconditional compassion and a relentless determination to alleviate suffering.”

I guess there might be some truth in all these things.

Perhaps not.

Thinking about my own experiences as a nurse of 34 years, and with a few (albeit brief) experiences on the *receiving* end of the nursing profession here is my own list. Not based on research or evidence.... but simply based on personal observation:

Engaged.

I'm not talking about being engaged with patients here, although that is part of it. I am talking about being engaged with the very act of being a nurse.

Some nurses never really completely turn up for the shift. Others are in a real hurry to be somewhere else. But you always notice the nurses who are truly amongst it all.

Resilient.

Only a nurse or someone who works alongside a nurse will understand the toughness that is required.

And unless there is an ability to respond to the unique stressors that each shift throws up, a great nurse will not be great for long.

The great nurse will have their unique personal reservoir that they can tap into during tough times. Or a strong social support system to tourniquet their hearts when they are bleeding out.

They know when to hang on. They know when to let go.

Competent.

Great nurses may be smart. They may be academically astute. But they will always be competent.

In actuality, some of the best nurses I have ever worked with are not natural leaders.

They are not high achievers.

They are not intellectual Everest's.

They are not in positions of authority.

They are not often acknowledged by their organisations.

But they are solid clinicians. They are advocates for their patients. And when the shit hits the fan, you absolutely want them at your shoulder.

Confident.

Hmmm. Let's see.

Some great nurses are *totally* leaders.

On the occasions that the gears of being great nurse and strong leader do sync in a single individual ...lean in and hang on.

However, many of the great nurses I have worked have more a quiet confidence. In some respects, they may even come across a little under-confident.

They may tend to underestimate their worth within organisational structures. They don't talk themselves up much. They are not particularly interested in self-promotion, probably because they recognise that nursing is by its very nature is more about other than self. (This is both its real source of power and its greatest Achilles heel. But I digress...).

But when you watch them at work. There is a quiet confidence in their every move.
They make the rest of us look good by proxy.

Happy.

Great nurses always seem happy in their work. Well perhaps not always....but often.

Good shift, bad shift.... they seem comfortable in their skin and able to lift the morale of those around them.

As someone who tends to get all serious and frowny about 45 seconds into most shifts I envy them.

Assertive.

Finally, great nurses will do what needs to be done for their patients, their colleagues and themselves.

Even when it gets all difficult and even when it involves conflict with peers or organisations. But it is done with *graded* assertiveness.

From a place of quiet confidence and professional stability.



Ian Miller