

# TOP 10 “INTANGIBLES” THAT WILL HELP YOU BECOME A BETTER PHYSICAL THERAPIST

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I was recently asked to give a short 5-minute talk at a national meeting, and the topic was “What I will and what I won’t do in the training room/physical therapy clinic.” I sat on this for some time, thinking about what content I should include. What equipment do I include, what type of treatments will I or won’t I use in the clinic? After months of putting the formulation of this talk off, I decided to pull out my inner Tom Brady and call an audible at the line and completely change the play. I decided to slightly change my talk to be “What I will do in the clinic and what intangibles are needed to be a better sports physical therapist or athletic trainer?”

One of my former patients was an active NBA player. I was fortunate enough to take my family to see him play the Oklahoma City Thunder. On that night, instead of watching the game, I noticed myself watching him interact with his coaches, players, and their fans. What I saw was a brilliant display of someone giving everything for the betterment of the team. During warm-ups, while everyone else was jogging around taking it easy, he was sprinting from baseline to mid-court like he had a purpose. During layup drills, he attacked the basket and ran all the way back to half court every time, while everyone else jogged about half as far as he did. When the game started, he was the most enthusiastic player on the team – for HIS teammates. During a time out, guess who the first guy off the bench was? Of course, it was my guy! If a player came off the court and dropped their towel, guess who was there to pick it up and give them a pat on the back? You are right again, my guy! What I noticed that night was a player exhibiting all the “intangibles” of a great athlete. Although he did not



get much playing time that night, he was one of the most valuable players on the team. An intangible asset is an asset that is not physical in nature. You will not see intangibles in the stat sheet. They will not be seen on a resume or even with a face-to-face interview. They will not show up on your weekly productivity report to your managers. However, these are characteristics that are more valuable than any skill we can learn during physical therapy school or during any post education continuing educational course.

The primary goal of this editorial is to describe a list of 10 intangibles that will help you become a better sports physical therapist, and, in all reality, become a better version of yourself. These intangibles are not listed in any order, nor is this an exhaustive list. There are many more intangibles than the ten that I will list. But I believe these are a good start at some of the best.

### **#1: Teamwork**

Teamwork is a collaborative effort of a group to achieve a common goal or to complete a task in the most efficient way possible. It is rare that any one individual makes up a team. Shaquille O’Neil was quoted that during a stretch of one season some of the team felt that Kobe Bryant was not passing the ball enough. Shaq told Kobe that “there’s no I in team.” Kobe replied, “There’s an M-E in that mother f—er.” Teamwork in our setting of healthcare includes many individuals that can be seen in Figure 1. To be a good team player we must trust each other and understand that we are all equals. We should all work together for a common goal of getting the athlete back to their sport as soon as

they are able. There are times that we may feel that our cog in the wheel is more important than those of the other cogs. Remember, the other cogs probably feel the same as you – that they are more important. We must put that feeling of superiority aside so that we can keep open lines of communication and work together. Every member of the team is critical for success to occur. We need to be respectful, caring, and compassionate for our

athlete and each member of our team. The great coach Phil Jackson once said, “The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.”

## #2: Honesty

Honesty is the quality of being honest with people. It simply implies a refusal to lie to someone. There are times when honesty is difficult. Have you ever been asked the dreaded question by your significant other, “Do I look fat in this outfit?” The honest person tells the truth, the smarter person tells a lie! All kidding aside as you can clearly see honesty is not always easy. Being totally honest can make patients, people you work with, or your family angry or upset. I have learned the hard way that sometimes it is better to soften the honesty instead of just laying it all out on the table. Instead of telling the co-worker they are lazy, maybe suggest ways that they could be more productive. If a patient asks if they are doing as well as most people at this timeframe after surgery, it is best to be honest. But maybe be honest in a way that allows them to build hope and trust in you as their health-care provider. Honesty is a key component of one's character and a very admirable trait to have. John Lennon said it well when he was quoted, “Being honest may not get you a lot of friends, but it'll always get you the right ones.”



**Figure 1:** *The healthcare team.*

## #3: Integrity

C.S. Lewis said that “Integrity is doing the right thing. Even when no one is watching.” Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles. I would hope that we all want to have integrity. I can assure you that no one will ever not value integrity. There are many ways in which you can demonstrate integrity in the rehabilitation setting. Come to work ready to put in a full day, without complaints or frustration. Be a team player at work

and give help when it is needed, not just when it is convenient. Don't talk about co-workers behind their back, especially about things that you know would be hurtful to them. Try to see other peoples' point of view if there is a disagreement. Be accountable for your actions. If you have a patient that is struggling, don't constantly blame them. Practice enough self-reflection to see that maybe you are not giving them 100%. And if you have that ability to self-reflect, fix what is wrong. Try to stay cool under pressure and make sound decisions, even when the stress level is high. Lead by example. You want to be the person your co-workers look up to when they need motivation. If you lead by a good example others will follow and pick up on your integrity and want to follow your example.

## #4: Loyalty

Loyalty is the quality of being loyal. Loyalty is a strong feeling of support or allegiance. If you value patients, they will be loyal to you for life. One way to know if you are a good therapist or not is how loyal your patients are. We all have patients that return for every injury and recommend everyone they know to come see you for any musculoskeletal issues. And by the way, they will only see you and nobody else. That is true loyalty. The patient probably feels this way because you were able to help them when they needed care the most. They obviously trust you and

more than likely you made them feel valued. But it is not only our patients who should be loyal. We as therapists should be loyal to our patients. If you do not have the expertise to help them, you should be confident enough to refer them to someone else who can. Be loyal in return. We need to be loyal to our co-workers and physicians we work for and with. People appreciate loyalty. Please remember though, loyalty is earned and not given easily. Earning loyalty takes time, it does not happen overnight.

#### **#5: Positive Attitude**

Your attitude is the feeling or way of thinking that affects a person's behavior. It is a state of mind as it relates to situations, people, or things. We know that we are not going to have a great attitude everyday as attitudes are situational. When under stress, attitudes are not always high. However, we need to bring a positive attitude to work 100% of the time. We know that positive attitudes exhibit optimism and this is especially important for patients during rehabilitation. This positive attitude is especially important to your patients who do not always feel positive. You need to be their guiding light. Despite what you are feeling, you should always be positive toward your patients and co-workers. A positive attitude can help overcome adversity. If you are positive, you can look at the bright side of any situation and help others see light at the end of the tunnel. Your positive attitude will attract people, not repel them. Confucius said: "If you are positive, you'll see opportunities instead of obstacles."

#### **#6: Energetic**

Being energetic is having a zest for life and what you do for your profession. It should be easy to be energetic when you feel like you have a calling toward physical therapy and rehabilitation. It is easy when you feel that you have purpose! When you have energy and confidence you can emit a sense of peace and calm and help to energize those whom you meet. Remember that being positive is a choice only you can make every single day. Don't let others bring you down or try to steal your positive energy. Positive energy is especially important for your patients who most likely are in some level of pain or have some form of functional limitation. Think of how you feel when you are hurt, or not able to do the things that you want to do. Just like us, patients are not always energetic, or positive when they are

hurting or under stress. Hopefully, the patients can feed off your positive energy to overcome their limitations.

#### **#7: Authentic**

Authenticity is the quality of being genuine. I would hope that this is how you would want people to see you. To be authentic you must be yourself. To be able to show people the real you, you first must know the real you. That in and of itself can be a huge hurdle for many who have been hurt emotionally. Anyone who follows social media knows that we are constantly bombarded with images of who we should be, and who we should want to be. Being authentic is a collection of choices you must make every day. Try not to be what society thinks you should be, as that only suppresses the real you. That can leave you disconnected from others. That is certainly not what you need if you are wanting to be the best PT version of yourself.

#### **#8: Patience**

If I were totally honest, I would probably say that patience is the one intangible that I struggle with the most and I am guessing a lot of you are the same. We want something *now*. We need immediate gratification. To have patience is the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset. It is the ability to stay calm in adversity. I do know that with time and experience we gain patience, especially in the clinical setting. Having patience allows you to stay calm in adversity and allows you time to make better judgments. I have been in the operating room watching surgeons when things do not go exactly as planned. You can quickly tell the surgeons with patience from those who are impatient. The impatient surgeons typically yell at staff and blame others for things that go wrong. The surgeons with patience think for a moment, don't get upset, and come up with a resolution to fix the problem without even raising their voice. We should be like the latter while we are in the clinic. Stay calm when things are not going exactly as planned. Take a deep breath and exhale before making a rash decision. Your patience will usually have a calming effect on your patients and other co workers around you.

## **#9: Dependable**

Being dependable means being trustworthy and reliable. That means you will not let others around you down. This is an extremely important virtue to have for not only work, but also for family and friends. To be dependable you must put yourself in a position where your actions matter. You show dependability by your actions not your words. Being dependable means showing up to work on time. It means getting your paperwork turned in on time. If a co-worker needs help with a patient whose condition you are familiar with, help them out, share your knowledge with them about the subject. You prove you are dependable through action and results, not through words. However, if you do give your word to someone, stand by it. Carry through with what you say you will do. I sometimes use the desire to be dependable to my advantage. I have had instances where I want to do something, but I was not certain I would be able or that I was good enough to accomplish the task. Or when someone asks me to do something I am not sure I can do the task but want to push myself. I either tell someone I am going to do it or agree to do the given task. Because I want to be known as being dependable – it forces me to do things I do not have 100% comfort in doing. So, if you find yourself needing a push and you are the type of person that is dependable – say yes or announce to people you are going to do something. Then keep your word, start putting together an action plan, get to work, and prove your dependability. Most often you will have pushed yourself just enough that whatever you agreed to do will be a hit.

## **#10: Kindness**

I have left the most important tangible for the last. Simply enough it is to be kind. Kindness is the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. The Dalai Lama once said, “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.” For our patients and co-workers there are so many ways that we can show kindness and they are not that difficult for us to do. It can be as simple as being happy and smiling. How hard is it to smile at work? Other ways are to help around the clinic when it is busy. We have several great physical therapist assistants at our clinic who always come to help clean tables or pick up equipment when they have downtime.

They could just sit in the office and talk, but they show kindness and consideration for others. It is extremely helpful for those of us that have full case loads all day long.

Although we sometimes think our patients should be grateful for us, we should be grateful for them. Because of them we get the opportunity to heal and make people feel better daily. What job is better than that? Share praise for a co-worker when they do a good job. Tell your co-workers that you appreciate them. You will never find a person who does not like to hear that they are appreciated. Admit that you are wrong and don't be afraid to share your mistakes. It makes others feel much better when they realize they are not the only one that makes mistakes. And if all else fails – tell a joke. A very good friend and former student of mine works in our clinic and constantly tells goofy jokes. It never fails to bring laughter. As much as people like to say they hate the “dad jokes,” you know that they all love them!

If you follow and try to be compliant with even half of these intangibles, you will no doubt be a better clinician, a better friend, a family member, spouse, etc. I challenge you to try to adopt even one or two of these intangibles for 3-4 weeks and see how it changes your own mindset and even those around you. If you already have adopted some of these in your personal and work life, I would challenge you to add one or two more. Take an index card and write several of the intangibles on them and tape them to your mirror in the bathroom so you are reminded daily of the “intangibles” you want to possess. This will help keep them in your mind daily. It is much easier to remember them when you see them constantly.

If you can think of other intangibles that I have not mentioned feel free to contact me on social media at Twitter - @robptatcscs and Instagram – Robert\_Manske.

I think these intangibles and others like them are important enough that I would love to keep the dialog going and spread the word. Go out, take it to the max, and be the best physical therapist version of yourself you can be!