

During your career, you will have many documents placed in front of you that you will not pay much attention to. They will aim to convey an abstract concept to you (like professionalism, empathy, or justice) in a typed format that does not lend itself to teaching high-minded ideals, and you will skim over the words to save time. Time better spent tackling the mountain of other things that fill your day.

This is not one of those documents.

The first thing you should know is, you may fail.

Nearly 70% of applicants to medical schools do not get in. Do not take your success for granted. If that possibility scares you, good. If it doesn't, then you are not the type of person who needs to read this. You don't take the possibility of failure seriously, and medicine is not for you.

You are competing with a lot of other students at the top, and like so many fields, the differences between top performers are small. Those "small things" are what separates people for whom being a doctor is their life's work, and those for whom it's just a job. Who would you want taking care of you, or your loved one? And for the more cynically-inclined among you: who would you admit to your medical school or residency program?

Those "small things" include the behaviors we broadly call "professionalism". But it is deeper than that. Those "small things" stem from the decision you make to be **deliberate** about how you go about your day, your mission. The rules and behavior of "being professional" are signals to everyone else that you are the kind of person who is serious about their work. These "rules" follow naturally from you actively deciding that this challenge you say you want to take on, to become a doctor, is a serious one, worthy of serious effort. And since it will occupy the majority of your life, it is the same thing as saying that you take your own life seriously.

What does a deliberate person do? They do the things that can get them towards the goal and advance their mission. If they say they will give some pursuit their time, they mean it. They follow through, and they follow up. Little more scares them than others thinking their word isn't good, or that they join projects without intending to contribute.

A deliberate person also avoids the things that reduce their chance of success. They do not step into situations with potential future colleagues without preparation. They do not ask for advice to ignore it. Not only is that a waste of potentially great information. It also risks that individual thinking you are the kind of person who superficially seeks help and then blows it off. And in the relatively small, tight-knit community of medicine, where reputations are hard to build and easy to lose, what is worse than that?

This is all advice I got many years ago, from my own friend and mentor. And, it ended with a story. This person told me of a guy he knew, a surgical resident in a good-sized program in a big city. Many programs have multiple hospitals besides the main hospital, and he had just spent several weeks at one of these smaller units. Before a weekly conference with other residents, attendings, and the Chair of the department, there were a few minutes given to

informal chit-chat before the presentation began. This resident was asked about his time in the smaller hospital. He didn't have a kind word to say. He complained about the nurses, the inefficiency, the incompetence, the headaches and the hiccups, all of which he had nothing to do with. He had no responsibility for any of this. He may have thought he was confiding in friends and colleagues, who surely agreed with his perspective. But, his audience knew he often dropped the ball in a thousand little ways. He dressed the part and spoke well, but he was known for not confirming who had what responsibilities on his team; for answering pages late; for not preparing well. Well, the Chair listened attentively to all of this. At the end of the story, he stood up and told the resident that, if he didn't like working with the staff at the other hospital, he could just leave. He was out of the program, forever. And that was that. He ended the story with this, what I write to you now: **always act like a kind, damned good doctor**. Whatever that means to you, do it.

Now, for the rules. Start on these now, because it will only get harder to make these into habits as time goes on.

1. If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.
2. Follow up. If someone doesn't reply to you, touch bases in a few days. If someone asks something of you, let them know when they can expect a response. Let them know the same day to expect your full reply in a few days.
3. Follow through. Don't join activities that you can't contribute to.
4. Take serious advice seriously. Write it down, in an actual notebook with an actual pen, in front of the person giving you that advice.
5. If someone is helping you, let them. If they ask for you to help them help you, it is in your interest to do so.
6. Don't complain. Let others complain, but don't join in.