

Own Your Growth: Grit and Self-Leadership Skills Every Sterile Processing Technician Should Develop



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Learning Objectives

- 1. Define self-leadership and grit in the context of Sterile Processing, highlighting their role in professional development and resilience.**
- 2. Guide Sterile Processing technicians in assessing personal strengths and growth areas using self-reflection, feedback, and self-assessment tools.**
- 3. Demonstrate goal-setting and accountability strategies that help Sterile Processing technicians improve technical skills and professional behavior consistently.**
- 4. Encourage continuous learning habits that prepare Sterile Processing technicians for future leadership roles and help them overcome challenges with persistence.**

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In Sterile Processing, success is not measured by luck or titles; it's built on persistence, self-discipline, and a deep sense of purpose. Every tray you assemble, every instrument you inspect, and every challenge you face shapes your ability to grow in one of healthcare's most essential professions. Yet one quality often separates those who simply do the job from those who lead and inspire others: grit.

Grit, paired with self-leadership, is what allows Sterile Processing technicians (SPTs) to push through challenges, learn continuously, and take ownership of their growth. It is the force that keeps you motivated when days are long, audits are intense, or when it feels like recognition is in short supply. Developing grit doesn't happen overnight; it's a mindset built through experience, reflection, and deliberate effort.¹

SPD professionals can use self-leadership to cultivate grit, assess personal growth areas, set meaningful goals, stay accountable, and prepare for leadership opportunities that will shape the next generation of Sterile Processing. Self-leadership can be defined as the practice of intentionally influencing your own thoughts, behaviors, and emotions to achieve your goals. It means leading yourself before leading others. In the context of Sterile Processing,

self-leadership translates to taking responsibility for your performance, learning, and professional development without waiting for someone else to direct you.

For SPTs, this might mean proactively learning a new sterilization system, studying the latest Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI) standards or Association of periOperative Registered Nurses (AORN) guidance, or seeking feedback after a

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tray recall incident. These small acts of ownership demonstrate the power of self-leadership; they turn everyday work into professional growth.

Grit, as psychologist Angela Duckworth defines it, is the combination of passion and perseverance for long-term goals.¹ Grit is what fuels you to keep striving for excellence, even when things get tough. In SPD, grit might show up when a technician stays late to ensure a

tray is perfect, when they volunteer to cross-train in a new area, or when they refuse to give up on passing their certification exam.

Together, self-leadership and grit form the backbone of resilience: the ability to recover, adapt, and thrive in a high-pressure environment. SPD work is full of unpredictable challenges: urgent operating room (OR) turnovers, changing standards, supply chain disruptions, and the pressure of zero tolerance for error. Technicians who lead themselves with grit don't just survive these moments; they use them to build stronger habits and deeper confidence. Growth begins with self-awareness. Before you can lead yourself effectively, you must understand your strengths, values, and the areas that need improvement. This awareness provides clarity and direction, helping you focus on where your energy will make the most impact.

Self-Reflection

Take time each week to reflect on your performance. Ask yourself:

- What went well this week?
- What challenged me the most?
- What did I learn about myself or my work habits?
- How did I handle stress or feedback?

Reflection helps reveal patterns; perhaps you notice you perform best under structure but struggle when faced with unexpected changes. Recognizing this allows you to strengthen your adaptability while appreciating your consistency.

Seek Constructive Feedback

Feedback is one of the most valuable growth tools available. Invite feedback from supervisors, educators, and peers you trust. You might ask:

- "Can you share what you think I do well during tray assembly?"
- "Are there areas where you see room for improvement?"

Receiving feedback takes humility and courage, both key components of grit. It's not about criticism; it's about clarity. Honest input allows you to adjust behaviors, strengthen skills, and refine your approach. Many organizations provide development tools like skills checklists, competency assessments, or communication style surveys. Even a simple strengths finder test or emotional intelligence questionnaire can give insight into how you work under pressure, how you solve problems, or how you influence others.

Once you have a clearer picture of your strengths and opportunities, document them. Write them down and revisit them monthly. Seeing your progress in writing reinforces accountability and motivation, hallmarks of self-leadership. Every professional development journey needs direction. Without clear goals, even the most motivated technician can lose focus. Goal-setting provides structure to your grit; it turns passion into action.

Set SMART Goals

Writing out SMART goals is an easy way to define what you want to accomplish. SMART goals are:

- Specific - Clearly state what you want to achieve
- Measurable - Identify how you'll know when it's accomplished
- Achievable - Set realistic expectations for your time and resources
- Relevant - Align goals with your role and career vision
- Time-bound - Assign a deadline to stay on track

Example:

Instead of saying, "I want to improve my inspection skills," a SMART goal might be: "I will spend 15 minutes at the end of each shift reviewing the AAMI ST79 inspection section and practicing one new inspection technique per week for the next two months."

Lesson:

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Quiz Answers:

1. B, 2. B, 3. A, 4. B, 5. B, 6. A, 7. A, 8. B, 9. B, 10. A

SMART goals not only clarify what you want to do but also create a path to how you'll do it.

Create Accountability Systems

Accountability keeps your goals alive. Find a mentor, educator, or colleague who can support your progress. Schedule regular check-ins to discuss challenges, wins, and next steps. Accountability can also be internal. Keep a growth journal, track completed goals, and reflect on lessons learned. For instance, if your goal was to improve turnaround times without errors, track your weekly metrics and note what worked or didn't.

Accountability transforms grit from intention to action. It's one thing to say you'll improve; it's another to prove it consistently over time. In Sterile Processing, change is constant. New devices, updated standards, evolving infection control practices; what worked five years ago may not meet today's requirements. Continuous learning is how SPTs stay adaptable and relevant.

Develop a Learning Routine

Commit to learning something new every week. This could include:

- Reviewing one AAMI or AORN guideline section^{2,3}
- Reading an industry publication article
- Watching a manufacturer's training video
- Discussing new processes with OR or infection control colleagues
- Microlearning — short bursts of focused study — helps keep information fresh and manageable within busy schedules

Pursue Certifications and Cross-Training

Pursuing advanced credentials such as Certified Healthcare Leader (CHL), Certified Instrument Specialist (CIS), or Certified Endoscope Reprocessor (CER) demonstrates commitment to excellence and deepens technical expertise. Similarly, cross-training in decontamination, assembly, and high-level disinfection (HLD) widens your perspective and makes you more adaptable when staffing or process changes occur.

Grit shows up in these moments, when you push through fatigue, stay curious, and challenge yourself to grow beyond your comfort zone.

Learn from Setbacks

Every professional faces mistakes or setbacks. A failed audit, a missed step, or a negative review can feel discouraging. But gritty technicians turn these moments into powerful lessons. Ask:

- What can I learn from this experience?
- What can I do differently next time?

- Who can I reach out to for help improving?

Self-leaders understand that growth often hides inside failure. The courage to keep improving after a setback is the true mark of professionalism. Grit isn't just a personality trait; it's a professional advantage. In Sterile Processing, where precision and consistency are non-negotiable, grit ensures you maintain excellence even when motivation fades.

Consider the daily realities:

- Long shifts under pressure
- Unexpected case surges
- Instrument shortages
- Limited recognition for hard work behind the scenes

It's grit that keeps you showing up focused on patient safety. It's grit that drives you to master complex tray systems or learn advanced sterilization cycles. And it

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is grit that helps you push through certification exams, quality audits, and professional challenges with integrity. Research shows that grit often predicts success more reliably than talent alone.¹ In the SPD environment, gritty technicians become role models, they remain calm under stress, inspire peers, and help maintain team morale during difficult times.

While self-leadership begins with the individual, its impact multiplies when adopted across a team. A department filled with self-driven, gritty professionals creates a culture of accountability and growth.

Encourage Shared Ownership

When technicians take ownership of their work, ensuring trays are complete, equipment is functional, and processes meet standards, they contribute to departmental reliability. Supervisors can reinforce this by recognizing initiative and encouraging open problem-solving discussions.

Promote Peer Learning

Knowledge grows when shared. Encourage technicians to present what they've learned from conferences, webinars, or manufacturer sessions. Peer-to-peer learning empowers others and strengthens the sense of teamwork and shared growth.

Model the Behavior

Leaders and educators play a vital role in modeling self-leadership and grit. When leaders admit mistakes, seek feedback, and keep learning, they create psychological

safety for their teams to do the same. In this way, grit becomes contagious, and each individual's resilience reinforces the department's collective strength.

Grit and self-leadership are the foundation of leadership readiness. Many SPTs aspire to become leads, educators, or managers, but leadership is not about a title. It's about influence, consistency, and the ability to guide others through example.

Technicians who demonstrate self-leadership already practice key leadership behaviors:

- **Accountability:** Owning your performance without excuses
- **Communication:** Sharing feedback respectfully and clearly
- **Integrity:** Doing what's right, even when no one is watching

Own Your Growth: Grit and Self-Leadership Skills Every Sterile Processing Technician Should Develop - Practice Quiz

- 1. What best defines self-leadership for a SPT?**
 - A. Relying on others to manage your career growth
 - B. Taking responsibility for your own actions, learning, and performance
 - C. Avoiding feedback to maintain confidence
- 2. In the context of Sterile Processing, what does grit most closely represent?**
 - A. Short bursts of motivation during busy days
 - B. A persistent drive and resilience to achieve long-term goals despite challenges
 - C. The ability to follow instructions without question
- 3. Why is self-assessment important for SPD professionals?**
 - A. It helps identify personal strengths and areas needing improvement
 - B. It allows SPTs to compare themselves to others
 - C. It eliminates the need for feedback from peers
- 4. What is one effective way to receive feedback that supports professional growth?**
 - A. Ignoring constructive criticism to maintain confidence
 - B. Viewing feedback as an opportunity for learning and self-improvement
 - C. Taking feedback only from senior leadership
- 5. Which of the following is an example of goal setting in Sterile Processing?**
 - A. "I will check trays faster."
 - B. "I will complete 100% tray accuracy audits over the next 3 months by reviewing instructions for use (IFUs) weekly."
 - C. "I will try to be better at my job."
- 6. What role does accountability play in self-leadership?**
 - A. It ensures that individuals are responsible for their progress and actions
 - B. It allows others to monitor performance without personal involvement
 - C. It limits independence in the workplace
- 7. Continuous learning helps SPTs by:**
 - A. Keeping skills current and preparing for future leadership roles
 - B. Reducing the need for teamwork
 - C. Avoiding certification renewals
- 8. How can SPTs build grit in their professional journey?**
 - A. By avoiding difficult assignments
 - B. By staying committed to improvement even during setbacks
 - C. By focusing only on short-term rewards
- 9. What is an example of demonstrating self-leadership during organizational change?**
 - A. Waiting for leadership to provide all answers
 - B. Taking initiative to learn new procedures and support peers
 - C. Complaining about increased workload
- 10. Which of the following best supports long-term professional growth for a SPT?**
 - A. Setting clear goals, seeking feedback, and engaging in ongoing education
 - B. Working independently without collaboration
 - C. Avoiding additional responsibilities



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These qualities prepare you to lead teams, mentor new technicians, or contribute to quality improvement projects.

The path to leadership also requires emotional intelligence, being aware of your own emotions and responding calmly under stress. Leaders with grit stay composed during audits, communicate effectively with OR staff, and make decisions grounded in both data and empathy. When opportunities for advancement arise, those who have consistently demonstrated self-leadership and grit will naturally stand out.

Make it a point to:

- Set a personal vision. Define your “why.” Why do you do this work? How does your role impact patient safety?
- Develop routines. Small, consistent habits, like daily learning, journaling, or debriefing after each shift, build discipline.
- Embrace discomfort. Growth lives outside your comfort zone. Take on tasks that challenge you, such as learning new equipment or leading an in-service.
- Celebrate progress. Recognize your achievements, no matter how small. Each success reinforces your confidence to keep going.
- Surround yourself with growth-minded peers. Spend time with people who inspire you to push further.
- Reflect and recalibrate. Regularly assess your progress and adjust your goals. Self-leadership is an evolving process, not a one-time effort.
- Remember that at the heart of every great SPT is purpose. You don’t just clean instruments, you restore trust between the OR and the patient. Every set that passes through your hands carries the potential to save a life.

- Acknowledge that when your daily work connects to that greater purpose, grit becomes natural. You’re no longer just completing tasks; you’re contributing to healing, to safety, to excellence.

Self-leadership reminds you that your growth fuels your department’s success. The more you invest in yourself, the stronger your team becomes. Owning your growth as an SPT takes more than skill, it takes courage, self-reflection, and relentless persistence. Self-leadership empowers you to take control of your professional journey, while grit keeps you steady through every challenge.

Together, these qualities build the foundation for excellence in Sterile Processing. They transform technicians into innovators, problem-solvers, and future leaders who elevate the profession and protect every patient we serve. Your growth is your responsibility, but it’s also your legacy. Lead yourself with grit, and you’ll not only master your craft; you’ll inspire others to rise with you. **HPN**

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