

Communication Awareness
Are You Sending the Message You Intend?
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Communication is the manager's most important job, and for some it is also the most difficult.¹ There is no way out of this. Communication should be included in the well-known short list of inevitable human experiences which includes death and taxes. It is not limited to any geographic area nor is it species specific. It has been around much longer than landlines and will continue to evolve long after any of us are here to talk about it. Transmitting/receiving information or a message is a survival tool for all. In order to help practices not only survive but grow, practice leaders need to have a useful communication skill set. Leaders should be self-aware of their communication skills. They should also periodically request feedback from their closest peers and mentors on how they may improve this critical, must-have asset.

As owners, managers, administrators and leaders, it is valuable that we understand some groundwork about workplace communication. Active listening is good. Speaking the same language is really good. A perfect blend of the two is to savor the expanse. The growth can be phenomenal. Envision a thriving business environment where customers are happy, employees are happy and goals are being met and exceeded. This environment could not exist without effective communication.

Effective communication is more than a common business catch-phrase. If a leader of people is interested in evaluating his/her communication skill set, this is one place to start. Many leaders strive to understand and implement the basics of effective communication. At a minimum, it is a composition of active listening, verbal articulation, and respect of all participants. When complemented with an awareness of style, tone, personal interaction and completeness of a message, the language is better understood.

Completeness of a message is a critical skill for all members of an organization. How often do you receive incomplete messages? If this is a continual problem within an organization, one would benefit to examine the methodology and the examples shown by leadership. *Do you set a good example for the health care team to follow?* Incomplete messages can create havoc and inconvenience in the workday. More importantly incomplete messages can risk the timely delivery of quality patient health care. Many managers seek ideas for staff training and staff education. A tailored training session on workplace communication channels, message writing, and flow charting for voice and email messaging would likely benefit many practice teams.

Also within the scope of establishing viable communication routes within the practice, a manager should plan to create communication routes that consider a variety of day to day contacts. When creating a communication map for a team, a manager can provide a great first step by listing "go-to's" for typical interactions of health team members. A list of frequent daily contacts for a practice may include:

Clients (Established and Potential)
Owners
B2B (Business to Business)

Coordinated Professionals
Sales Representatives
Esteemed Colleagues

The second step to establishing a valuable communications map is to infuse the desired professional dialogue. Sometimes, a script is helpful. Most often, the art of active listening is required. The verbal communication dance includes a balance of speaking and listening. The ability to articulate the correct message to the recipient in a manner that is professional, respectful and helpful is a wonderful communication core value. This is not only important to verbal communication but also important throughout written communications.

Getting back to the self-awareness of communication, one thing many people want to know is: "Are they getting my message?" If this crosses your mind, it is time to check in with the other person in the conversation. Is the listener interested? Are they participating in the conversation? Are they asking questions?

For example, have you ever had a conversation with a friend who seemed to be listening as you gave an exciting account of a new program at the veterinary hospital? You explained that during the month of Nevertober, the veterinarian was going to give away vaccines all month long to new and established clients. You explained every detail of this wonderful program. This would help vaccinate more pets in one month than in the whole year. This was going to be front page news. It was just so exciting! But, this was going to break the veterinarian. This probably wasn't a good idea for the practice. You shared your concerns about this. However, for pet owners, it seemed like great news. It was unbelievable news. And then, you realized somewhere between Nevertober and unbelievable, your friend had vacated the premises. How could this be?

A self-awareness technique might include the following questions to ponder if previous situation seems familiar in personal or professional dialogue:

- Do you get caught up in your moment or your perspective?
- Do you over-explain?
- Do you talk in run-on sentence format? Do you ramble?
- Do you use vocabulary that is understood by everyone involved in the conversation?
- Do you invite people into the conversation?
- Do you vary your vocal tone and facial expressions?

On the flip-side of this conversation is a listener who may have difficulty with active listening. To improve active listening skills and complete the communication loop, a listener can:

- Ask questions.
- Show interest.
- Occasionally paraphrase what the speaker has said to ensure that interpretation is accurate.
- Provide feedback

Each participant has a responsibility to the conversation. In addition, growing leaders have a responsibility for their ongoing, individual communication development.

Along with verbal communication skills, a growing leader will expand and improve their written communication skills. Written skills are not limited to writing job performances and memos. A leader will view every stroke of the pen or keyboard as a communication opportunity. A well composed letter to a client or to the business attorney is appreciated by the recipient. Message, style, etiquette and presentation are important qualities of a professional letter. Although formal

written letters are not used as often as they once were, a skilled letter will reflect the professionalism of the organization from which it arrives. In other words, use the good stationery, employ spell check, proofread, proofread again, and create a visual that exemplifies your organization. Autograph your work.

Writing a letter may seem time consuming and it is. It is also meaningful to receive a letter intended for its one and only recipient. Templates are appropriate for a number of functions and they can be personalized, too. Common sense is positioned on the scale between individually crafted letters and template usage. The closer the personal relationship between the writer and the receiver, the scale should tip to writing a customized letter.

How do we know when to write, call, email, text or send a memo? Typically, face-to-face dialogue is used most frequently for personal, two-way, immediate feedback conversations. Telephone is a close second but does not have the same character as a face to face conversation. The advent of the mobile society and growth of cellular regions has allowed for immediate connectivity but still lacks the same richness as an in person conversation. There are also times when a caller should consider that the cell signal may fade or drop. If that happens, will that damage the message the caller had intended? Recently, mobile phone companies have creatively pointed this out in television advertising. Although their ads are humorous, it does bring up a good point if trying to deliver critical messages.

As part of a complete communication exercise, it is an imperative to understand when it is appropriate to leave voice messages and text messages for recipients. Everyone on the health care team will benefit from training regarding appropriate and inappropriate message delivery. A list of items to place in a message training protocol might include:

- Appointment confirmation calls
- Laboratory results
- Surgical or procedural updates
- Accounts receivable
- Hospitalized patient progress
- Patient death (expected or unexpected)

Every practice will improve their communication within and with their clients as well as improve time management if this type of training is implemented.

Beyond those channels, email, intranet, memos, letters, reports and bulletins are used. These are written communications which have their place with regard to effectiveness. A writer will premeditate the message and provide a written record for the recipient. A response may or may not be requested. These are generally much less interactive pathways.

A communication side-effect of the mobile society is the impulsive response (IR). Formally known as the knee-jerk reaction, IR can be identified as an electronic terse response, a flaming comment or clever abbreviation. An IR will show up in TXT messages, emails and discussion forums. Once sent, they are irretrievable. It is a mistake to fire off an emotional response to something that has offended. This is unproductive and unprofessional. Netiquette indicates that no response is better than a flamed response.

Many professionals take advantage of online discussion groups. These discussions can be very helpful as they provide an array of thought and opinion for a wide range of topics pertinent to specific jobs or industries. Prior to participating in an online discussion group, it is advisable to observe the group for a couple of weeks to obtain a sense of culture, scope of knowledge and level of professionalism. Prior to joining a discussion group for the first time, a participant needs to become familiar with existing discussion rules, regulations and guidelines set forth by the host of the discussion group. Typically, these guidelines can be located on the site with relative ease.

In conjunction with upholding the site guidelines, a professional should also be aware that anything that is discussed can be viewed by anyone at any time. Employee/employer confidences should be maintained. Management/employee relationships should be respected. And revealing business relationships concerning clients, colleagues, competitors and neighbors is taboo. When participating in a discussion group, the effectiveness of the group is depending upon the honesty and integrity of each participant.

No matter the path of communication one uses, the following tips can be helpful²:

- Craft the message with a clear purpose in mind.
- To persuade and inspire people, aim for true intimacy.
- Don't forget to listen.
- Pay attention to timing.
- Be aware of body language and actions.
- Stay in touch with the grapevine.

The art of communication is constantly evolving for a conscientious professional. To deliver accurate messages and decrease misunderstandings, an investment in communication training will pay off. Development of communication skills can benefit individuals and work teams beyond expectations. There is a deluge of communication resources available for the inquiring manager. Learning and sharing these skills will help everyone on your health care team to send better messages and improve active listening skills. Remember, the content of a message is only part of the interaction, be confident that you are sending the message you intend.

¹ Wallington, "You Don't Say," CIO (October 1, 2000), 78-80; and Rubin, "Like the King, King David K new How to Strum a Person Like an Instrument," Fast Company (November 2000), 410 -413.

² Daft, Richard, "6th Edition Management," (2003), 584.