

Communication

How committed are you?

A control tower was attempting to contact a pilot who was making his first solo flight. It seemed as if the inexperienced aviator was having difficulties landing. After a number of failed transmissions, the frazzled air traffic controller finally got through. Realizing the young pilot could be in somewhat of a dangerous situation, the controller quickly blurted out, "Pilot, what is your altitude and position?" The pilot responded, "Well, if you must know, I'm 5' 8" and I'm sitting in the front."

To borrow a famous movie line: "What we seem to have here is a failure to communicate." It's not surprising when you consider that the 500 most commonly used words in the English language have over 13,000 definitions. No wonder we often have a hard time communicating. What's a person to do? Walk around carrying a pocket dictionary at all times? And, to further complicate matters, we have *technology!*

Today, we are so bombarded by electronic communications such as E-mail, voice mail, fax transmissions and conference calls, that it has actually become easier to speak to people without ever having to see them face-to-face. Judy Neill, LVN, CMA, an office manager in Dallas, Texas states, "With our technology today, we may be quicker, and we may be more accurate, but we have lost the personal touch."

Technology will continue to advance, but it will never eliminate the basic need to communicate or handle situations on a personal level. The ability to communicate, and to do so effectively, will always remain a high priority skill and will aid you in your career.

For medical facilities to prosper today, as well as in the future, there must be a commitment to outstanding communication. Neill believes, "With patients, fellow employees, and

doctors, effective communication is vital in the medical industry."

Zelda Balfour, an office manager in West Sayville, New York, says "If you have a commitment to communication, nothing is ever left unexplained or misunderstood. Communicating effectively within the office ensures that we communicate effectively with our patients."

The fact is, if you cannot effectively communicate within your office, any communication outside of your office (with patients or others) is destined to be wrought with the *slings and arrows of outrageous* misunderstanding.

There are a number of ways to enhance your ability to communicate. Here are a few:

Step 1: Learn to be a great listener

A plaque that hung over the main door of Lyndon Johnson's Oval Office in the White House simply stated: "If you've been doin' all the talkin', you ain't been doin' none of the listenin'." Aptly put, this phrase goes straight to the heart of poor communication.

People not only have a hard time listening, they have an even harder time actually hearing what is said to them. As you may know, "listening" and "hearing" are two totally different things. Has anyone ever said to you, "You're listening, but you're not hearing a word I'm saying?" From the most basic of conversations to the most complex of negotiations, people are so busy thinking of what they want to say next, that they usually don't bother to really hear what is being said to them. Communication is a two-way street, and listening must have the "right of way."

Concentrating on two things at one time is impossible. You can't hear what is being said to



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you, if you're thinking about a response. In becoming a more effective communicator, you must remember to actively listen to the needs and concerns of the people with whom you are dealing.

Therese Winicki, CMA, a business manager for a radiological practice in West Islip, New York, agrees. She states, "Listening, observing, and hearing are three of the most important aspects of communication. Whether it's a patient, a doctor, or fellow employee, unless you give your complete attention, you are running the chance of misunderstanding or miscommunicating important information."

So what can you do the next time you're having a discussion with a patient or fellow employee? Realize that the person speaking to you genuinely believes in what they are saying and is trying to communicate their concerns to you. Paraphrase and repeat back what they have just said. This reassures them that you have not only heard, but also comprehend exactly what they are saying. Respond to what they have said, and proceed with the conversation. Furthermore, always try to reinforce your message in a positive way—even in the most negative of situations. As B.F. Skinner once wrote, "The way positive reinforcement is carried out is more important than the amount."

Bottom line: People want to be heard, understood, and treated with respect, not brushed aside.

Step 2: Mean what you say, and say what you mean

Mark Twain once said that the difference between the "right" word and the "almost right" word is the difference between "lightning" and "lightning bug." Words, as well as the way they are used, are extremely important. Like it or not,

people judge you by what you say and the way you say it.

Your choice of words, as well as your delivery, will obviously assist or hinder you in getting your point across in any type of communication. Yet, many people don't work on their word choice or usage. If you would like to improve in this area, here is a suggestion. Choose a good book or magazine and read it aloud for 15 minutes a day. Force yourself to speak slowly and clearly, enunciating every word. Sounds simple, but try it. In time, you'll find your choice of words and your ability to speak will noticeably improve. I guarantee you will be amazed at the results.

This approach may seem odd and even sound silly; however, many of the greatest communicators of our time had to constantly work at their speaking and communicative skills. Churchill, known for his ability to sway entire countries with his words, would spend hours reading aloud from the published works of noted authors and speakers of his time. Prior to a speech, he devoted days, sometimes weeks, to his choice of words and delivery. For "everyday" conversations, he would still work on making sure he always had the right words for the right occasion. Even though he was known for his quick wit and extemporaneous remarks, his son once was quoted as saying, "Father spent many hours on his extemporaneous remarks."

So, even for Churchill, becoming an effective communicator took time and effort. It didn't happen overnight.

Step 3: Be accessible

Many companies state that they offer an "open-door policy." If so many companies say they have it, then why are so many employees afraid to walk through it? Could it be that employees know that

an open door can quickly become a closed door, complete with a deadbolt?

To increase communication, you must work to establish and maintain a "no-door policy." If employees or associates are uneasy coming to you, then go to them. If people can't get to you to talk with you, then it doesn't matter how well you listen or how well you speak. You have to commit yourself to being as accessible as possible. You must also be at the forefront to advocate dialogue and encourage associates to share ideas.

Balfour states, "You just have to be available for problems or questions that pertain to a patient or interoffice personnel." And Winicki adds, "It's imperative that I'm accessible at all times. A problem usually has to be resolved right now. I'll stop what I'm doing and handle it immediately; the office *must* continue functioning."

In essence, the environment you create and the tone you set will determine your quality of communication. "Taking the door off of its hinges," so to speak, will eliminate a symbol that is often viewed as the largest impediment.

Listening, saying what you mean, and accessibility. These are the key steps to improving your communication skills. Dedicate yourself to them, and you'll be on the road to becoming a more effective communicator. Though the steps sound easy, in reality, they require quite a bit of work, determination and commitment. Not any one step will be a panacea for all communication problems, but each offers a solid place from which to start, and may be a primary factor in determining your future, altitude and position! ■

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