

Communications: Impact vs. Intent

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Refine your communication inside and outside of your practice.

In the years that we have worked with dental practices, there has been a consistent challenge for both doctor and team that significantly affects the success of the practice. It is not the schedule, or collections; it is no system or strategy. It comes down to a simple, yet powerful skill that pervades every aspect of the practice... effective communication.

Research shows that 80% of people who have challenges at the workplace have them due to a lack of effective communication with others. The impact of our communications can be very different than our intent, which can create a different result in areas such as staff attitude and performance, patient case acceptance, patient retention rate, and new patient referrals. Refining this skill is an ongoing process that requires time and focus.

What are the keys to effective communication?

- *Remain Open* - Listen with the intent to understand, not judge. Psychologist Carl Rogers lectured decades ago that THE major barrier to communication lies in our natural tendency to judge. Judging taints our ability to truly hear what the other person is saying. It is especially detrimental in situations where feelings and emotions are involved – present in just about every aspect of your practice. Listen without forming an immediate reaction or opinion.
- *Ask Good Questions* - When it comes to communication, the power is in the asking, not the telling. Questions which allow the listener to elaborate yield much more valuable information and keep communication open.

- *Actively Listen* - Focus while others are speaking so that you are not crafting your answer as another person is talking. Good listening skills are valuable in growing a patient-centered practice and creating long-term team members. In addition, interrupting only serves to delay effective communication.
- *Problem Solve* - Any time that people interact, there is potential for different perspectives and opinions, which may be demonstrated as conflict. Rather than trying to avoid conflict, learn how to collaborate.

These keys will help to move you closer to improving your communication skills, especially important during times in the practice of high stress. Those times create opportunities to practice communication skills, ultimately giving you more tools for productive and successful outcomes.

How can you remain open and listen when emotions are high? Sometimes, you can't. At this point, the most effective response might be, "I apologize; I'd like to discuss this tomorrow when I will be better able to listen to what you have to say because this issue is really important to me," or, "I'd like some time to consider what you've said, and I'm not in a spot to do that right now. Can we come back to this at the end of the day?" Most often, the genuineness of this request is respected, and you will have greatly reduced the negative impact that could have occurred. You have with one sentence defused the defensiveness, resistance and resentment that can occur if you listen judgmentally.

When the stress of the moment has lessened, what are the next steps?

- *Be genuine* - Confirm that your agenda is to listen. Effective communication demands that we listen to not only the content but the intent. How something is being said is just as important as what is being said. Note that listening does not imply agreement. Steven Covey's work in successful businesses has repeatedly demonstrated this to be true. "Seeking first to understand" will increase trust levels and increase the likelihood that challenges will be addressed and resolved positively in the practice.
- *Raise your awareness level of your body language* - Effective communication is demonstrated both verbally and non-verbally. When a team member has asked to speak to you, and you are making chart notes, the non-verbal communication is that your task is more important than your team member. In the society we live in today, we have become master multi-taskers (or so we think!), but to effectively communicate we still need to stop what we are doing, look at the person who is speaking to us, and maintain an open stance in a non-distracting environment. Entire books have been written on the subject of body language because of the power it has. By noticing our body language as we communicate with team members, we can have the impact mirror the intent and ensure the exchange has more value.
- *Have empathy* - Don't forget to listen with compassion, focusing on the feeling words that the person is using. If what is said is, "I was devastated when you said

that in front of the patient," and your reply is that you understand they are mad, you haven't heard that person's communication correctly. Evaluate what you might experience in a similar situation. This should help you assess what this person is experiencing, so you can better acknowledge how he or she feels.

These three self-checks will refine your communication in and outside your practice. Although it can be a challenge to change the way we communicate, the results can have long-term measurable results in your team synergy, increased staff morale, and patient satisfaction. In our next article, we'll discuss the verbal skills to lead the communication process, gleaning the highest degree of information to enhance the practice, the team, and the patient experience. ■



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