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# Internal Communication

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Discuss how to create awareness of communication
2. Recognize different types of communicators
3. Discuss diversity and how to communicate with a diverse team

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**C**OMMUNICATION IS THE CORNERSTONE OF ANY RELATIONSHIP; it can make the difference between a successful relationship or a failed one. Communication failures are one of the leading causes of inadvertent patient harm and employee dissatisfaction. People communicate in different ways and understanding how to effectively communicate with others – and across different communication styles – is essential for delivering high quality, safe patient care.

## OBJECTIVE 1: DISCUSS HOW TO CREATE AWARENESS OF COMMUNICATION

When a person communicates, their intended message may be misinterpreted or misunderstood by the person receiving the message. Communication breakdown can have serious consequences in the realm of healthcare. For example, Central Service (CS) professionals may receive a call from the Operating Room (OR) to turn around an instrument set quickly because the surgery schedule and instrument needs were miscommunicated. This may result in a delayed procedure while the surgical team waits for an instrument set to be reprocessed.

All parties must choose their words carefully to impart pertinent information clearly and concisely – and reduce the risk of that information being misunderstood by others. Body language is another form of communication that can “speak” volumes. Effective communication skills require a high level of self-awareness. Understanding one’s personal communication style will go a long way toward helping eliminate

roadblocks when conveying information and communicating with others.

While the world of CS and OR is intimately intertwined, the communication styles of those working in these departments may greatly differ. Having the ability to adapt to different communication styles and personalities is critical for ensuring quality customer service and effective teamwork.

## OBJECTIVE 2: RECOGNIZE DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMMUNICATORS

Effective communication requires an understanding of the different styles of communication. By learning and recognizing the communication styles in oneself and others, individuals can more effectively determine needs, recognize potential problems or challenges and, perhaps, even subtly turn a conflict into a productive conversation. There are three basic communication styles: aggressive, passive and assertive.

The aggressive communicator:

- Is often closed minded;
- Is often a poor listener;
- Has difficulty seeing others’ point of



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view; and

- Interrupts and monopolizes the conversation.

A closed-minded communicator might say, “I don’t care what the person from surgery says. They have no idea what goes on in here.” Someone who has difficulty seeing the other person’s point of view may say, “If you say so, but don’t be surprised when you fail” or “Do you really believe you know more than someone who’s been here ten years?”

The passive communicator is often:

- Indirect in their communication style;
- Agreeable;
- Afraid or uncomfortable to speak up;
- Hesitant to communicate openly; and
- Unwilling to control a conversation.

The passive communicator may miss opportunities to share important knowledge or insight. They may also be uncomfortable speaking up when witnessing a co-worker taking shortcuts or unknowingly using the wrong size cleaning brush on an instrument, for example. They may also assume blame for another’s mistake because they prefer to avoid confrontation.

The assertive communicator is often:

- An effective and active listener;
- Willing to clearly state limits and expectations;
- Open to stating observations, but without casting labels or judgments;
- Able to communicate feelings, needs and wants directly, honestly and promptly; and
- In tune with others’ feelings.

An assertive communicator will typically be open and accepting of new ideas, but will ensure that all parties are in agreement before adopting a change. For example, if the CS department is wishing

to change an instrument set, the assertive communicator might say, “That seems like a good idea, but let’s check with the OR to ensure it is acceptable to them.”

Also, if the OR requests that CS turn over an instrument set for the next case, the assertive communicator will often clearly state limits and expectations, perhaps by stating, “I’m happy to turn this set for you, but do you realize it will be two hours before it is ready and safe for patient use?”

### **OBJECTIVE 3: DISCUSS DIVERSITY AND ITS IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION**

Over the past 25 years, the workplace has experienced greater cultural, generational and personal diversity. These differences can make communication more challenging; however, when team members learn to communicate effectively with others, they will experience a far more productive team and will find they are better able to reduce conflict and improve camaraderie. What follows are some methods to facilitate more effective communication across a diverse work team.

#### **CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Team members must learn how the culture of each person in the team impacts the manner in which they communicate – and how they prefer others to communicate with them. For example, in some cultures, employees feel uncomfortable being singled out for praise in front of other employees. A resolution would be to ask the employee how they prefer to be acknowledged. Language differences can also create a communication barrier, so employees and leaders must strive to find effective ways to share information and messages to all team members.

#### **GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY**

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Figure 1

WORKPLACE, PERSONAL AND LIFESTYLE CHARACTERISTICS BY GENERATION				
Characteristic	Veterans (1922-1945)	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Generation X (1965-1980)	Generation Y (1981-2000)
<b>Core Values</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respectful</li> <li>• Dedicated</li> <li>• Disciplined</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimistic</li> <li>• Involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skeptic</li> <li>• Informal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realistic</li> <li>• Confident</li> <li>• Social</li> </ul>
<b>Work Ethic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard worker</li> <li>• Respects authority</li> <li>• Loyal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workaholic</li> <li>• Efficient</li> <li>• Questions authority</li> <li>• Desires quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reliant</li> <li>• Seeks structure</li> <li>• Skeptical</li> <li>• Balanced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multitasker</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Goal oriented</li> <li>• Tolerant</li> <li>• Determined</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership Style</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hierarchy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensual</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asks why</li> <li>• Challenges others</li> <li>• Everyone is the same</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yet to be determined</li> </ul>
<b>Interactive Style</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoys meetings</li> <li>• Team player</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrepreneur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participative</li> </ul>
<b>Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face-to-face</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct</li> <li>• Immediate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email/text</li> <li>• Voicemail</li> </ul>
<b>Work Is</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An obligation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An adventure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenge</li> <li>• Contract</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A means to an end</li> </ul>
<b>Message That Motivates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your experience is respected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You are valued (needed)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show why your way might be better</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You will work with other creative people</li> </ul>
<b>Work/Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't mix</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work to live</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance</li> </ul>

many intend to remain in the workforce longer. This means employees across multiple generations are commonly working on the same team, and all employees must communicate effectively with one another to build a cohesive team. Blending these generations into a cohesive team without creating chaos takes a concerted effort across all employees.

While multi-generational workforces are not new, this is the first time in history that four generations are expected to coexist in the workplace. In the past, it was commonplace that older workers were the bosses and the younger workers were the worker bees. Today, roles are being exchanged regularly and this generalization no longer applies. If

multi-generational communication isn't effectively addressed, this change has the potential for affecting employee motivation and productivity, and quality outcomes. Of course, different generations often have different communication styles, so it is important that employees understand how best to share information with their teammates of all ages.

What follows are some generational categories and their common communication characteristics.

#### **Mature (veteran) generation and older**

**baby boomers:** This generation prefers face-to-face communication. The texting and social media world tends to have little to offer to this generation. In the

workplace, this generation prefers verbal communication.

This group respects authority and expects respect for a job well done. These individuals generally stick to the instructions given, work hard and follow the chain of command. They may rarely complain and prefer to stay with one company or organization for the duration of their career. While older baby boomers identify with the mature group, they may offer more ideas than the mature generation and expect to lead, not follow.

#### **Generation X and the younger baby**

**boomers:** This generation prefers technology as a form of communication and is more comfortable with web-based



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communication, such as conference calling. This generation also has numerous career interests and is open to changing career paths (and organizations/companies) if the right opportunity presents itself. These individuals like to multi-task and respond well to informal communication.

**Generation Y, otherwise known as millennials:** This generation grew up with technology and the social media movement, and is generally comfortable with both. As such, they are adept at using technology to communicate. These individuals prefer jobs where they can be rewarded for creativity and individual contributions.

Bridging communication gaps across the generations can be challenging for CS because different experiences, lingo and communication styles and preferences can widely vary; however, accepting one another's differences and making an effort to appreciate, accept and adopt varying communication styles can lead to a successful team – especially when each team member shares the common goal of delivering quality customer service and promoting safe patient care.

Figure 1 shows the various characteristics of each generation. While not every generation shares all these characteristics, they do tend to follow a general pattern. This will provide a starting point to begin to understand the

complexity of blending the generations in the team.

The following strategies will help all CS employees communicate more effectively with their diverse teammates.

- Avoid stereotyping and any accompanying unconscious biases.
- Be trusting and trustworthy.
- Keep communication open and inclusive.
- Maintain respect for all generations and cultures.
- Speak more slowly. Often, those raised in the U.S. speak quickly, which can prove challenging for someone of a different culture who is new to the U.S. or the English language. Avoid speaking too slowly, however, because some employees might consider that insulting.
- Avoid jargon, which may not translate well across different languages or cultures (or even from one region of the country to another).
- Be sensitive. What one culture may find humorous may insult another.
- Be concise. Messages that remain to the point helps avoid confusion and preserve the message's integrity.
- Repeat communication often to reinforce the message.

### CONCLUSION

Effective communication is important for the success of every organization and that is especially true in the complex realm of healthcare where messages shared can

impact satisfaction, service and safety.

It is essential that CS professionals have the knowledge and skills to understand the differences that exist across the team and how those differences might impact communication. Standardized communication approaches can bridge gaps between employees of different backgrounds, cultures and generations, which will serve to enhance teamwork and reduce the risk of human error. **C**

### RESOURCES

Hammill G. Mixing and Managing Four Generations of Employees.

Bentley CE. Communicating with Your Global Workforce.

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