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## Communication

### Improving Quality Outcomes through Fundamental Communication

*A Short Checklist of Ways to Improve Provider-Patient Communications*

*Stuart R. Levine*

**Stuart R. Levine** is chairman and CEO of Stuart Levine & Associates LLC, an international consulting and leadership training company that helps leaders to get it right by focusing on the discipline of fundamentals and building an organization's confidence to achieve results. He is author of *The Six Fundamentals of Success: The Rules for Getting It Right for Yourself and Your Organization* (Double-day/Currency 2004). He can be reached at 516/465-0800 or by email at [slevine@stuartlevine.com](mailto:slevine@stuartlevine.com).

An estimated 98,000 people die every year as a result of medical errors according to a 1999 study by the Federal Institute of Medicine. Approximately 7 percent of those deaths were attributed to errors involving medications and protocol breakdowns. These disturbing statistics reinforce that quality outcomes are critical to health care and that through fundamental communication, quality can significantly improve. The way to achieve these objectives is to build communication systems that share data and challenge the system to deliver at higher performance standards.

Effective communication is the central principle that will drive reimbursement formulas based on quality outcomes, alignment of physicians, administration, and staff and patient/employee satisfaction. Over the past 25 years, I have had a broad spectrum of experience in the health care industry that has led me to this conclusion.

Due to time and financial pressures of those people who provide health care, there is a growing concern of the consequences of poor communication. As an example, when

a patient is diagnosed in a physician's office, frequently there are language, literacy, and fear barriers. These conditions impede the appropriate follow through and protocol for the treatment and healing of patients. The impact of this gap of information creates unnecessary readmissions into hospitals and poor patient results. It is imperative that a patient understands the diagnosis and resulting prescriptive action so that they can self-manage their disease.

It is my belief that communicating successfully is a fundamental business skill. I believe it is fundamental to all human activities. Communicating successfully is, first and foremost, a two-way process. It is as much about listening to others as it is delivering your message. It is as much about tone and body language as it is word choice and syntax.

Hospitals are incented to discharge patients quickly. This fact highlights the importance of length of stay and its financial impact and implications on an institution. The reduction of length of stay can be met by increasing a sharing of information between physicians and the nursing staff. Frequently, people do not move through the discharge system because of a lack of shared

sense of urgency by the professional staff. Practitioners can support the financial stability of a hospital by better understanding its mission and the shared responsibility they have to its continued success.

The most enlightened hospital administrators now understand the need for including physicians in the strategic planning process and nurses as well. By doing so, hospitals gather important practical experience as well as buy-in to the plan a significantly better chance of implementation. This creates energy throughout the institution on a day-to-day basis for better long-term results for the hospital.

### ***Don't Let Yourself Be Rushed***

Miscommunication often results from circumstances where people are pressured. They want to accelerate a process that cannot safely be accelerated. Regardless of your role in an organization, you can improve the communication process by recognizing when you're being hurried into acquiescence. Don't say, "I get it," until you do get it.

Give feedback. Repeat what you've been told, in your own words. Insist on clarification and explicitness. Here's an example:

**Supervisor:** "The director says that increasing security in the unit is a priority. Does everyone understand?"

**Employee:** "So we need to see identification before we let anyone into the unit? What kind of identification is okay?"

Bosses notice great communicators. It's a skill recognized in every organization. If you're in a leadership position, you're initiating quite a bit of communication. You can make your communication more successful by mastering a few skills. Communicate rhythmically. This means establishing a time pattern to your communications, the way a drummer sets a beat and keeps it going.

Send out reports weekly, using a predictable and logical pace. For example, on Monday mornings distribute your staff memo highlighting new information, setting goals, and assigning tasks. Every Friday afternoon, distribute your own weekly productivity report to your supervisor. Try to hold face-to-face meetings biweekly, even if only for five-minute updates.

Daily email updates, weekly team meetings, and biweekly meetings with individuals all create a steady beat. That beat provides the structure and urgency your colleagues need to stay in step with each other. You create energy and momentum, improving productivity.

Read and respond to reports promptly. Let people know you value fast turnaround, and walk the talk.

### ***Provider-Patient Communications***

The same fundamentals apply to communications with patients. Stress has a decidedly negative effect on communications. Additionally, a patient may be impaired in terms of hearing, seeing, and responding due to trauma or medication.

Here's a short checklist that can improve provider-patient communications:

- Ask for feedback, and don't assume positive outcomes. For example, "Mr. Smith, is the new medication giving you stomach problems?"
- Be aware of non-verbal communications. Does the patient look you in the eye? Are physical problems impeding non-verbal communications?
- Build a bedside communications "team." When possible, involve your colleagues in direct communication with the patient, especially if cultural or linguistic issues are present. Encourage family and friends of the patient not only to visit but, if appropriate, to participate in conversations with providers.
- Perhaps the most important tool of communication is something your parents knew and probably used in raising you; I know mine did. My parents would often repeat themselves when they felt I needed to hear what they had to say. "You've already told me that," I remember replying once, in a piqued tone of adolescent irritation. "Yes," my mother said. "But if it's important, I say it twice."

If you were in the operating room and the nurse passed O positive blood, the doctor should repeat those words, O positive blood because when it's important you say it twice—especially when you are playing in the health care industry for the high stakes of someone's life. **JHCC**