

*Are You Listening?*

# Tips on Improving Your Communication Skills

May B. Piotrowski

**N**o matter where you go or what you do, communication is essential to reach a destination or accomplish a goal. Effective communication has occurred when both sender and receiver interpret a message in the same way.

“An effective communicator is skilled in the art of ‘connecting’ and ‘getting in touch’ with others,” says Robert Atkin, associate professor of business administration at the University of Pittsburgh’s Katz Graduate School of Business.

BMETs turn to their communication skills each time they are asked to examine a piece of equipment. To determine what’s wrong, they require the end user to recount the sequence of events leading up to the time when the equipment malfunctioned.

During this stage, a communication breakdown may occur and as a result create roadblocks for both parties. “The demands of learning to operate and maintain health care technology can put a considerable strain on relationships of clinicians and biomedical technicians,” according to Chris Johnson’s *BI&T* article, “Communication Breakdown Between Users and Suppliers of Clinical Technology.” (Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 54)

To establish a connection, BMETs should understand what messages the end user is willing (and not willing) to accept, a concept Atkin says is crucial for a communicator to connect with an audience.

“Effective communicators are not only experts in their field—they also know their audience,” says Phyllis Davis, search consultant for the Aegis Group, a Michigan-based search firm specializing in recruitment of health care personnel. “Communicators must have the ‘talent’ or acquired skill to listen to their audience to succinctly address issues,” she adds.

Atkin agrees that listening is a must to get a speaker’s message across. “I don’t think you can communicate well until you have first learned to listen well,” says Atkin.

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## Failure to Communicate

Work orders were overflowing and the phone was ringing off the hook. Some BMETs were pulled from their normal assignments to help with repairs. A BMET who repaired a device left the floor and failed to tell anyone that the device has been repaired. About 30 minutes later, another member of the team repaired the same device.

“Not spreading the word only spreads confusion and in some cases could breed distrust,” says Mike Mastro, CBET, CRES, director of biomedical engineering at South Jersey Healthcare. “Communication is vital to having any department run smoothly and efficiently.”

Failure to communicate a repair status to an end user is a common occurrence in the field, according to Ken Maddock, BSEET, director of clinical technology services at Baylor Health Care System. “Develop formal methods for communicating internally and externally,” advises Maddock. “Don’t rely on word of mouth or notes left on equipment for critical communications with clinical staff.”

Maddock suggests for clinical engineering departments to sit down with clinical managers to establish a communication plan. This plan will not only ensure that everyone is on the same page, it will also “get the information into the right person’s hands as soon as possible,” says Maddock. “As soon as a technician becomes aware of a safety issue, it should be communicated to the manager.”

## Conflict Resolution

Handling a conflict among employees can be a difficult task. Supervisors often find themselves resolving petty differences. Petty or not, “the important thing is for a supervisor to remain objective,” says Mastro. “Don’t immediately view the conflict as a negative experience because good things could come of it.”

For Mastro, he views problems between employees as “growing pains.” “Whenever a conflict comes up, I sit down and listen to each side of the story. Afterwards, I develop a mutual resolution,” says Mastro. “The

outcome doesn't always leave both sides happy, but as a supervisor, you must remember it isn't all about the needs of one person but rather the department as a whole."

Maddock's conflict resolution strategy includes giving each person a chance to tell the other—without interruption—what they consider the problem to be. "After both parties have a chance to speak, the next step is mediation," says Maddock. "But even if it appears that the interaction is successful, it's important to follow up." For Maddock, one way to prevent future conflicts is by establishing a shared incentive for completing a project.

Atkin says misunderstandings can stem from personal characteristics, lack of candor, or an unwillingness or inability to adjust communication methods. To communicate effectively, both parties should commit themselves to breaking down any barriers that may exist—these include poor listening skills, too much confidence (or lack of), and assumptions.

"The most common source of miscommunication is assumption," says Davis. She strongly advises that speakers should never assume everyone has taken their point as it was originally meant.

### Communication Skills and Job Performance

"Whether we want to believe it or not, our customers are nurses, physicians, patients, and administration," says Mastro. "Happy customers mean satisfied customers. Satisfying anyone can be a tall order, but BMEs and CEs should strive to do their best." For Mastro, establishing a level of trust and maintaining it is important. "Good communication skills lead to this level of trust because the end user feels that we keep them in the loop at all times."

During the hiring process, "supervisors have a tendency to focus on technical skills and as a result overlook communication skills and attitude," says Maddock. "Once on the job, supervisors should set specific expectations for when and where communications are expected to happen and in what format."

Supervisors should recognize employees who can provide accurate, succinct information in a timely manner. In the biomed field, these are some of the skills that keep customers happy, according to Maddock. "Medical device end users want to know what's going on. If they know what's going on, they can usually work around any problems," says Maddock.

Communications skills were cited as one of the deciding factors in choosing managers, according to a

survey conducted by the University of Pittsburgh's Katz Business School. The survey of more than 50,000 employers shows that, in addition to an ability to work with others, communication skills are contributing factors to job success.

Through constant evaluation and practice, one can sharpen his/her communication skills. "For some, communicating is natural," says Davis. "But for the skilled communicator, it's a perfected art." ■

## Do's and Don'ts

Listening first before talking is such a basic concept, yet we all need to be reminded. Here's a short list of basic communication concepts to jog your memory:

### Do

- Listen. Allow the speaker to finish his/her thought before sharing your opinion.
- Keep things civil. If the conversation is headed toward a heated argument, it's best to continue the conversation when both parties are less stressed.
- Look attentive. A subtle nod is enough to provide the speaker feedback that his/her audience is taking in information.
- Offer specifics. Detailing your reasons on why you disagree with a person's opinion or conclusion may clear the air of ambiguity.
- Share knowledge. Sometimes a person may not be aware of a process, impeding him/her to understand where you are coming from.

### Don't

- Rush to dismiss other people's opinions even if you disagree with them.
- Come across as someone who knows everything. People tend to hold back information from a perceived know-it-all.
- Raise your voice. Intentionally or unintentionally, an elevated voice could intimidate the person you are trying to work with. He/she could either raise his/her voice back at you or simply clam up. As a result, nothing will be resolved.
- Personalize conflicts. Instead of approaching the conversation with a "me versus you" mentality, approach it with an "us versus the problem" mindset.
- Be sarcastic. While humor may diffuse tense moments, sarcasm won't go over well with someone who is frustrated trying to explain a problem.