More Than Just Talk

Amy Souza

How Skillful Communication Affects Leadership and Your Practice’s Bottom Line
In today’s economy, as businesses try to do more with less, taking time out to focus on improving communication might seem frivolous. It’s anything but.

On a recent Friday afternoon, Laurie K. Brown, COMT, COE, administrator at Drs. Fine, Hoffman, & Packer LLC, Eugene, Ore., had one final detail to handle before leaving for the weekend. She’d learned that an employee had acted in a way not in keeping with company policy, and because Brown would not be in the following Monday, she needed to delegate the response to one of her five direct reports.

“My first instinct was to send a message to that employee, explaining the situation and telling the employee what needed to happen, so I sent off the email and copied all managers,” Brown said. “Then I sat back and thought about it for a minute and decided that might not be the best way to handle it. So I recalled the message and instead sent it just to the manager who would deal with the situation on Monday, alerting her to what response I expected and telling her to handle it in her own way. I realized sending that email to everyone would have created needless stress.”

Brown has worked as an administrator for 14 years and considers herself a good communicator, but she continues to learn and alter her way. After reading *The Anatomy of Peace* with a book club comprised of medical administrator colleagues, Brown thinks more deeply about the way she puts forth a message, including that Friday afternoon email.

“The book looks at how you communicate for success,” Brown said. “You have to figure out how you’re feeling when you communicate because that affects how the message is received—especially when you need to make a correction. It takes time and effort to do that, but it’s made a big difference.”

**Soft Skills, Hard Facts**

Communication is often referred to as a soft skill—an interpersonal rather than technical ability. People might call it “squishy,” hard to define, or impossible to measure, and that leads some to dismiss its importance. But consider these numbers:

- 70% of small to medium-sized businesses report ineffective communication as their number one problem (SIS International Research study).
- Training to remedy deficient writing skills cost private-sector businesses an estimated $3.1 billion per year (2004 College Board study).
- In a company with 100 employees, 17 hours were spent clarifying communication, for an annual estimated cost of $528,443 (SIS International Research study).
- 46% of respondents from finance, government, healthcare, high tech, insurance, and manufacturing industries reported that their organization’s business communications cause mistakes and performance errors (2006 study by consulting company Information Mapping).
- 55% say employees are not easily able to find the information they need to do their jobs (2006, Information Mapping).

In addition, communication skills fall under the heading of emotional intelligence, which is widely regarded as the top predictor of leadership success. If that’s not persuasive enough, consider that the Certified Ophthalmic Executive designation requires you to demonstrate your ability to communicate.

“Successful administrators have good communication skills,” said Donna M. McCune, CCS-P, COE, vice-president at Corcoran Consulting Group, San Bernardino, Calif., and a member of the first COE question development committee. “For those who seek COE certification, several areas of the test—including human resources, marketing, and risk management—rely on the administrator’s ability to communicate with the physician about these important and constantly changing areas of practice management.”

**Developing Your Skills**

There’s no doubt that administrators have a tough job. Not only must you understand the specifics of running an ophthalmology business, you must also successfully interact and share information with employees from different areas—admin staff, technicians, IT personnel—as well as with doctors. Brown noted the benefits of learning about the business from multiple angles.

She received her training on the job, starting on the technical side and moving to administration 11 years later. Having tech as well as administrative experience has helped her communicate well with the practice’s doctors. “I know where they’re coming from, and I understand our core business,” she said.

So what potential pitfalls await?

“The biggest problem is a conflict of expectations,” said Walt Underwood, FACMPE, practice management consultant at Corcoran Consulting Group. “We all come into any relationship with our own set of expectations, and that continued on page 54
becomes the paradigm for communicating. You need to start by trying to understand the other person’s expectations and make sure they understand yours.”

Anne Loehr, a speaker, author, and consultant focusing on leadership and generational issues, learned how to foster communication among different types of people the hard way—by managing an eco-hotel and safari business in Kenya in which her 500 employees came from 42 tribes, divided not only by religion but by years of tribal grievances. Yet she succeeded in running that business by exercising what she calls the Platinum Rule—do unto others as they would do unto themselves.

“You need to adapt your style to the other person to make sure your message gets across. You’re the manager, so you need to cross that bridge first,” she said. “It’s hard but it’s not rocket science.”

Loehr and Underwood suggest paying attention to the following details to improve communication skills.

- **Focus on your objective.** What point are you trying to get across? What’s the best method to achieve your goal?

- **Establish rapport.** “People need to believe you’re interested in them,” said Underwood.

- **Discover the mindset of the person you’re talking to.** Is s/he open to what you’re saying?

- **Listen 80% of the time, talk 20% of the time.**

- **Ask good questions.** “Asking open-ended questions gets people to think for themselves,” Loehr noted.

- **Quell your emotional response.** “People who are really good managers work on controlling their tempers. We all have good days and bad days, but it’s important to not let emotion get in the way of what you’re trying to accomplish,” said Underwood.

- **Make sure you were understood.** Underwood recommends forthcoming follow-up at the end of your conversations by asking, “Tell me what you understand I said.”

- **Practice.** “Study people you think are good communicators,” said Underwood. “Why do you think they’re good?” Also, take advan-
tage of opportunities to work on your skills, such as by joining Toastmasters International or enrolling in an acting class.

- **Consider investing in personality tests for your team**, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or DiSC assessments. “Spend the money to get someone in to explain the results, particularly to learn how different personality types work best as part of your team,” Loehr recommended. “Don’t leave it as simply an exercise in self-awareness because then it can be used as a judgment.” Loehr also recommended posting the results alongside your company telephone list so you can remember how best to approach each person on your team.

**Return on Investment**

It’s in your power right now to become a better communicator—and thus a more effective leader. Step back and examine your own skills; learn as much as you can about your staff and how they communicate; and review your practice’s overall approach to communication.

At Drs. Fine, Hoffman, & Packer, the open door policy means any employee can talk to anyone else. Once each month Brown meets with her five direct reports. Once each week she meets with the business office manager. Staff meetings are held every two months with all technical and administrative staff, as well as the doctors. Also every two months, Brown and the doctors meet to review strategic goals. In addition, the practice’s mission statement is “posted everywhere.”

This abundance of communication, Brown said, leads to little ambiguity about the practice’s goals, and as a result, the practice has very low turnover. In today’s economy, as businesses try to do more with less, taking time out to focus on improving communication might seem frivolous. It’s anything but.

“I equate it to making the transition to electronic tools,” Brown said. “With EMR, you have to get your head around the idea that it’s going to take more setup on the front end and maybe a bit more work as you begin to implement it. But what you quickly realize on the back end is increased efficiency to the Nth degree. It’s the same thing with communication. The ROI is just incredible.”

---

**American Board of Opticianry Review Course**

**FRIDAY, MARCH 25, 2011**

8:00 AM–5:00 PM

San Diego Marriott & Marina

**IF YOU WORK in a dispensary, how do you demonstrate that you have achieved the skills and knowledge to be a valued member of an ophthalmic practice? Certified dispensers are vital to managed care providers.**

Did you know that the American Board of Opticianry (ABO) certification is the national standard?

Your certification will be recognized in every state and many foreign countries. In non-licensing states, certification is especially important; it is your only credential—your professional distinction. The majority of ophthalmology practices require their opticians to be either licensed or certified.

The American Board of Opticianry Review Course provides you with a valuable tool to advance your career and prepare you for the ABO examination.

Registration and Inquiries:
karen@asoa.org

703-591-2220