As managers or business owners I'm sure we all think we communicate really well. But how many times have you come across a breakdown in communication, albeit minor, and stopped to think about how your message was conveyed?

The art of effective communication is getting the right message across in the right way. Effective communication is a vital part of practice management, in terms of both managing our team and patients; good communicators make much better managers and leaders.

However, many of us fail to deliver our messages as effectively as we could – why? We are usually 'in a rush' or 'busy' and want to get the message across as quickly as possible. This is almost certainly the case when communicating with our team.

So where do we start?

Communication with your team needs to be positive, clear and confident. Understanding your team and how each individual learns is key; one team member may interpret a message differently from another. Asking your team to complete learning styles questionnaires will be an eye opener and will certainly help you to understand how to adapt your methods of communication to suit each team member. It will also ensure that each team member is given every opportunity to receive and understand your message clearly.

Communication with the team and patients, at all times, should be:

- **Confident.** Be confident in your communication; don’t shy away from saying what you really need to say, no matter how difficult or awkward the situation may be. Be aware of your body language and your tone of voice so that confidence is not confused with arrogance or aggressiveness. It can sometimes be difficult to show confidence when communicating in a difficult situation but remember, being confident does not stop you from also being kind, approachable or empathetic.

- **Genuine.** Be honest in your communication – again, in a difficult situation this does not mean that you can’t also be tactful.

- **Natural.** Be yourself. The way in which you communicate may sometimes need to be adapted to suit certain individuals, but you are you, insincerity or ‘falseness’ when communicating will generate a lack of respect.

- **Open.** Sharing information with team members is vital. Be open with your communication, share and ask for ideas, thoughts, views and opinions about your practice.

Communication at work does not have to be about work. It is extremely important for managers and leaders to be in touch with their teams on a personal or social level. Show an interest in what they do outside of work; what are their hobbies? What do they do at weekends? Who are their families? Communication will become easier with individuals as you get to know them better, as you may share common beliefs or goals.
Think about it – it is much more difficult to communicate effectively with a stranger than with someone you know fairly well isn’t it? Take time to talk to your team on a regular basis, it will build trust and respect, as well as improving communication within the team as a whole.

Know your patients

Getting to know your patients is also extremely important, certainly if they are embarking on a lengthy course of treatment. How often have you considered a patient to be ‘grumpy’ or ‘bad mannered’? Have you considered?

■ They may be nervous or anxious about their treatment – we all hate our surroundings for granted but would you be nervous when visiting a hospital or your GP? I would be a little. Talk to the patient, communicate with them, spend some time with them, try and alleviate their fears.

■ A patient may have difficulty taking time off work for lengthy appointments – offer early or late appointments, talk to the patient about their work commitments, show an interest, try and help to schedule convenient appointments wherever possible.

■ Childcare – a single parent may find it difficult to arrange childcare for treatment sessions, or may need to bring a child along; be helpful and thoughtful.

■ Finance – a patient may desperately want or need treatment but may be concerned or embarrassed about money/affordability – discuss alternatives, do you offer zero per cent finance? Can the treatment be spread over a few months?

Take time to think about a situation from the other person’s point of view; don’t make assumptions about how other people may respond to your communication.

Effective communication is also about:

■ Listening
■ Understanding
■ Empathy

We automatically think of communication as verbal, but there are many other methods of communication that we can use in dental practice.

Handouts – questionnaires, memos, notices, reports, photos, information leaflets.

A handout, usually in the form of a memo, is an ideal form of communication as there are a number of small issues that need to be communicated, e.g. dates of forthcoming meetings or an outline agenda.

Publications – glossy magazines, newsletters, books, journals.

Publications can be used for CPD and for on-going learning and development. A good practice should aim to have a range of current magazines and journals available for all team members to read and refer to when necessary.

Meetings – team meetings, individual feedback sessions, inductions and appraisal.

Meetings are an essential part of team communication; they ensure good teamwork, motivate and allow all team members to communicate with each other. Meetings also allow the practice manager to assess team communication. Every practice, without exception, should have the following in place:

■ Induction policy/meeting
■ End of first month review
■ Six-monthly ‘one to one’ reviews
■ Annual appraisals
■ 15-minute morning ‘team huddles’ to assess and plan the day ahead
■ Monthly team meetings
■ Quarterly strategic planning meetings
■ A team ‘day out’

Seminars – presentations, workshops. Seminars and presentations by professionals/training companies are an excellent form of communication as they are usually prepared and performed by people who do this for a living and the quality of information is usually excellent.

Barriers to effective communication

There are many barriers and pitfalls to effective communication, many of which we may not even realise we are doing.

Tone of voice – shouting and sarcasm will obviously be interpreted as aggression and will most likely lead to poor performance and demotivation. Your vocal tone must be clear and level pitched.

Body language – hand gestures, crossing of arms and legs and any kind of rapid movements can be interpreted as aggressive, disinterest or apathy.

Facial expressions – smile when communicating (unless conveying bad news) – do not roll your eyes or frown. Ensure you make eye contact.

Inappropriate tone of voice, body language and facial expressions can have a very negative effect on communication and will almost certainly provide a barrier with regards to further communication with that individual as it can break down trust and respect.

Remember that how you communicate is just as important as what you communicate.

Effective communication is not difficult but it takes time, consideration and practice; the huge benefits to your team will far outweigh the small efforts you will need to make.

The BDPMAs the essential forum for dental practice managers and organises seminars on all aspects of practice management. For more information telephone the BDPM at 01452 886564 or visit www.bdpma.org.uk.

About the author

Nikki Berryman is BDPMa member, a dental nurse, has a diploma in dental practice management and a diploma in management. She has been married to Paul for 14 years and she enjoys running, hiking, cricket (watching, not playing), cooking and spending time with friends on the beach.

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