



Overcoming the Ten Most Common Barriers to Effective Team Communication

Overcoming these obstacles will lead to a happier, more productive staff.

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Communication is at the heart of medical practice management. Yet there are many barriers to effective communication that can interfere with the smooth running of a practice. This article describes the 10 most common barriers to effective medical practice team communication and offers six steps the practice manager can take to break them down. This article also suggests that the practice develop a team communication strategy. It suggests 10 communication principles that readers can share directly with their teams, and describes three hallmarks of effective team communication. Finally, this article provides a list of 25 practical questions that practice managers can use to improve their team's communication.

"That's *not* what I said."

"But I *told* you that I wouldn't be able to help you this morning."

"What did you mean by *that*?"

Members of the medical practice team become exasperated with one another and may say hurtful and accusatory things to their colleagues every day. That's because achieving high-level team communication is easier said than done. Many barriers get in the way of effective communication.

For example, communicating well can be especially challenging when employees are coping with tight schedules, difficult patients, and a host of curve balls they must face, especially when they are falling behind schedule. Medical practice team communication can be further taxed when the teams are large, culturally diverse, or short-staffed. Add into the mix that personalities, idiosyncrasies, biases, communication preferences, assumptions, and even noise frequently can interfere with effective team communication. Cliques, feuds, and the introduction of new employees in the practice can make team communication even tougher.

As the practice's manager, it's your job to identify, anticipate, minimize, and eliminate the barriers to effective team communication for your medical practice staff, no matter your team's size or composition. However, this, too, is a challenge. There are common communication barriers that are likely to crop up again and again,

causing miscommunications, flaring tempers, and other problems in your team, despite your best intentions. Your employees are likely to stick to their communication guns. Old habits die hard. And while it's important for you to teach the members of your team to communicate effectively with one another, they may not want to learn. In fact, they may not see improved team communication as an issue at all, let alone a priority.

The 10 Most Common Barriers to Team Communication

There are many barriers that interfere with medical practice employees' ability to communicate with and understand one another. Medical practice employees, like most people, take communicating with one another for granted. They may believe that their interpretation of events, behaviors, and other people's messages is correct, even when they are in error. They are also likely to believe that their messages are clear and easy to understand, even when they're not.

Bias can also rear its ugly head. Members of the medical practice team may forget that their fellow teammates may not think as they do and that they cannot read their minds. In some cases, the members

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of the team may be so closed-minded that they come into the team communication with chips on their shoulders and superior attitudes. They may believe that effective communication with certain members of the team is hopeless; and if so, they may clam up or stop trying altogether. And when communication errors do occur, they are apt to blame one another and not accept that they played any role in the miscommunication.

Clearly, a medical practice team is as complex as the individuals who comprise it. It is inherently fraught with many communication challenges. Consider these 10 most common barriers to effective medical practice team communication:

1. Physical Separation and Lack of Contact Among Team Members. When members of the medical practice team work in different parts of the practice day after day, or if they are in satellite offices, communication errors are more likely. Of course, it isn't always possible or desirable to have everyone working in the same location at the same time. However, separation and lack of contact among team members means that communication errors and misinterpretations are more likely to occur.

2. Gender Differences. A lot of media attention has been devoted in recent years to the idea that men and women communicate differently. In fact, it has been suggested that the communication differences are so vast that men and women must come from different planets. Clearly, medical team communication is challenged when messages are interpreted through a gendered lens.

3. Generational Differences. Miscommunication, misinterpretation, and frustration increase when a medical practice team runs the gamut from those who remember using a library card catalog to those who can't remember the days before cell phones. Different experiences and values can lead to many communication bottlenecks and errors.

SIDEBAR I:

Top 10 Communication Principles to Share with Your Team

Every medical practice will develop its own team communication strategy. However, there are certain principles common to all good team communication. Here are the top 10:

- 1) Time and attention are precious resources.** Make sure your communication is focused and clear. Provide only as much detail as is needed to understand and engage in your message.
- 2) Practice and demonstrate active listening.** Most of us take listening for granted and do not think much about developing our listening skills. However, passive, uncritical listening can become short and shallow. Poor listening habits sometimes carry over to conversations where careful attention is vitally important. The active listener makes the person speaking feel worthy, appreciated, interesting, and respected.
- 3) Choose the best medium for your message.** Make careful decisions about whether your communication should be verbal or written, face-to-face or technology-aided, one-on-one, or in groups.
- 4) Check that your listener is engaged.** If not, change the communication. Or save it for a time when you are both able to commit fully to the communication.
- 5) Choose the best format for your message.** For example, instructions are best presented in a linear fashion (step 1, step 2, step 3, etc.). Gathering input and ideas may be best achieved through brainstorming.
- 6) Provide the background information.** If your teammates need files, facts, figures, or other data to connect ideas or to make decisions, be sure they have them.
- 7) Don't put your teammates on the spot.** If they need time to process a message, be sure to give it to them before asking for a response.
- 8) Match your verbal and nonverbal communication.** Your words, posture, gestures, and facial expressions should convey a consistent message.
- 9) Be clear about what you expect.** Don't beat around the bush. If you need or want something, say exactly what it is.
- 10) Become a meta-communicator, as an individual and as a team.** Check on a regular basis how well your communication is going. Identify strengths, errors, and opportunities for improvement. •

4. Cultural Diversity. Each of us grows up according to rules and traditions that are specific to our nation, region, religion, and even our neighborhood or origin. We develop cultural beliefs and values that will remain with us throughout the rest of our lives. Our interpretation of a person's body language, dress, and

behavior can be vastly different from what the person intends. Most of us can't help but communicate and interpret communication through our own cultural perspective, causing a host of communication misfires and miscues.

5. Language Differences. Med-
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ical practices today are more likely than ever to employ individuals whose first language is not English. A linguistically diverse team has many opportunities for misunderstandings. Idioms and colloquial expressions can be especially troublesome.

6. Differences in Values and Beliefs. Members of your medical practice team may not hold the same view on things. For example, they may have hugely different beliefs about politics, sexual orientation, and other controversial subjects. One employee's offhand remark meant without harm may greatly offend another. It is challenging to negotiate differences in values and beliefs.

7. A lack of Trust. A fundamental lack of trust can make effective team communication extremely challenging. When your employees don't trust one another, they're less likely to communicate and share on

a completely transparent level. Information isn't shared that needs to be, and the communication that does exist may be judged as suspect and untrustworthy.

Tip: Trust comes into play espe-

cially when the team communicates with technology. An e-mail, for instance, doesn't allow members of the team to hear voice tone or to see facial expressions. Listening comprehension on the telephone is much more difficult than it is face-to-face, when the listener has the benefit of seeing the speaker's lips move. It is easy when communicating with technology for team members to make mistakes and to read intent that isn't there. Therefore, when technology comes into play, it is essential that team members give one another the benefit of the doubt; they must trust one another.

8. Noise. Exterior noise such as conversations of other employees or patients, background music, or even the roar of a lawn mower or construction work outside can weaken our ability to communicate well. An offensive odor can be "noise" that distracts us, too, such as the scent of too much perfume or body odor. Each employee in your practice may also be dealing with interior noise that gets in the way. For example, an employee may have a head cold or allergies, a headache, sore muscles, or other physical conditions that may be diverting his or her attention away from speaking carefully and listening to others. Or an employee's attention

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SIDEBAR 2:

Develop a Team Communication Strategy

A critical task for practice managers is to engage your team in creating (and continuing to review and revise) an effective team communication strategy. The strategy can address questions such as:

- 1) How can we create and follow a communication strategy for our team that adds value, rather than creating overload?
- 2) What, when, and how much are we going to communicate?
- 3) Where and how will we communicate?
- 4) Which media will we use to communicate?
- 5) Who will play what roles in the team's communications?

Look at the nature of the different kinds of work your team will be doing. Ask: What kind of communication is needed to support that work? •

SIDEBAR 3:

Three Hallmarks of Effective Team Communication

Overcoming the barriers to effective team communication is extremely important. But how do you know when your team communication is working? Here are the three indicators that your team is communicating well:

1) Team communication is regular. Regular communication helps the members of your team to maintain focus. It also allows your team to keep up to date with changes as they occur. It ensures that they are able to deal with difficulties or setbacks promptly and collaboratively.

2) Team communication is transparent. Transparent communication processes provide all team members with the same information and have no hidden agenda. Transparency increases the likelihood that team members will be aligned in their concept of where they are going and how they are going to get there.

3) Team communication is related to team goals. Communication processes that are related to team goals encourage team members to remain goal-focused and outcome-directed. Negative, destructive, and superfluous communication makes it more likely that your team will veer off course. •



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may be occupied by a problem in his or her personal life, or even by being in love. Both exterior and interior noise can interfere with team communication.

9. Information overload. It may seem counterintuitive, but sometimes too much information can lead to a lack of clarity. There is a limit to how much our brains can handle at any one time. If information is streaming by and there's a lot to take in at once, employees may feel bombarded with too much information. Communication is likely to slip through the cracks in such circumstances.

Tip: Too much information in too little time especially strains communication. It takes time and attention to communicate effectively.

10. Personal Biases and Prejudices. Every medical practice employee has had a lifetime of experience long before ever setting foot in your medical practice. That's why even the most fair- and open-minded employee may harbor biases and prejudices that can interfere with effective communication. For example, an employee may believe that a colleague resembles someone from his or her past, and attribute certain characteristics to that in-

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SIDEBAR 4:

25 Questions to Help You Improve Your Team's Communication

Here are 25 questions to help your team communicate more effectively. Discuss them with your team individually and as a group.

- 1) What is our team's biggest communication challenge?
- 2) What must our team stop doing so it can communicate more effectively?
- 3) What do you think is your greatest personal challenge in communicating well?
- 4) What is your preferred way of communicating?
- 5) What must our team continually communicate openly about to be successful?
- 6) What topics, if any, should our team stop communicating about?
- 7) How can our team incorporate more encouragement and appreciation in its communication?
- 8) How can our team incorporate more good manners into its communication?
- 9) How can our team communicate so it minimizes blame and guilt?
- 10) What's the biggest obstacle to effective communication in our practice?
- 11) How can our team use communication to improve morale?
- 12) How can our team use communication to strengthen relationships?
- 13) When has our team not communicated as well as it could?
- 14) When has our team communicated exceptionally well?
- 15) Where are the bottlenecks in the information flow among team members?
- 16) To what extent do team members receive the information they need to do their jobs?
- 17) To what extent do our team members support the communication of others?
- 18) To what extent do our team members trust one another?
- 19) How honest is our team communication?
- 20) How do team members ask for help from one another?

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dividual. Or an employee may particularly favor or dislike a colleague because of something seemingly innocuous such as his or her name, hairstyle, or even the car he or she drives. An employee's personal biases and prejudices may cause him or her to interpret communication in ways that are untrue, or to magnify small problems so they appear to be much larger than they are.

SIDEBAR 4:

25 Questions to Help You Improve Your Team's Communication

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- 21) How do team members communicate during times of conflict?
- 22) How do team members communicate during times of stress?
- 23) In what ways does our team's diversity influence its communication?
- 24) In what ways do generational differences influence team communication?
- 25) How well-informed do team members feel about what is happening in the practice? •

Six Steps to Breaking Down Communication Barriers

The medical practice manager must make it clear to the staff that communicating well is the job. In fact, effective team communication is so integral to working in a medical practice team that the employee's ability to communicate can become one of the criteria for your staff's regular performance and salary reviews. If your employees know that you'll be evaluating them on their ability to communicate with one another, they'll focus their attention on solving problems and on communicating more effectively.

In addition, here are six steps to breaking down communication barriers:

1. Model Effective Team Communication. Employees will pay more attention to what a practice manager does than to what he or she says. Therefore, if you want your medical practice team to communicate well with one another, the place to begin is with yourself. Speak carefully and clearly. Listen actively. Write thoughtfully. Read critically for comprehension. And make sure your body language matches your message and your intent.

2. Clarify Your Expectations. The notion that a team should communicate well is complex and abstract. Explain concretely what you want your team members to do and not do. Use easy-to-grasp examples as often as

you can. For instance, explain that you expect that they will stop what they're doing and give their colleagues their full attention when they're speaking with them. Or explain that you expect them to read and respond to your memos by the end of each day. Be specific.

3. Observe and Record Team Communication. Put yourself in the role of team communication ethnographer. As such, observe how the members of your team interact with one another without stepping into, correcting, or interfering with the communication. Remain objective and simply record what you observe. Pay close attention to gestures, expressions, reactions, posture, tone, speed, content, how close or far apart the team members are, whether they make eye contact, whether they interrupt one another, and the length of the communication. Look for clusters and patterns of behaviors.

4. Gather Input from Your Team. Interview team members. Create a focus group. Survey team members. Find out what each member of your team thinks about the communication in your practice. For this to work, your conversation must remain open and non-threatening. Ask probing questions, but do so with an even, non-judgmental tone and demeanor.

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5. Identify Barriers to Effective Communication and Name Them. Combine your ethnographic study and team research to identify barriers to effective team communication. Make them more concrete by naming them. For example, if you detect that your team communicates in a direct fashion but without appropriate manners (such as please and thank you), you may call this a courtesy barrier. Or if you find that there are miscommunications between native and non-native speakers of English, you may call this a language barrier. The act of identifying the barrier and naming it will make it more tangible to your team members and keep it in the forefront of their minds as they communicate.

6. Explicitly Teach Communication Skills. One of the most effective strategies for teaching better communication is the use of scenarios and role plays. Use them to compare existing behaviors with new and better ways to communicate.

Tip: The communication lessons you teach your staff will have benefit beyond improving team communication. Your employees will also be better able to communicate with your patients. **PM**

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