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Preface

The modern pharmacist faces a multiplicity of problems and complications arising from improper or inadequate communication. These problems become even greater as the pharmacist assumes expanded clinical roles and becomes a disseminator of health information to the public and to other health professionals. This volume has been prepared to explore many of these communication inadequacies and to suggest possible approaches to overcoming the problems.

The material in the book is practical and as one reviewer stated, "The suggestions are common sense!" The value of this book is established when we realize the number of times each day that we must be reminded of things that are "common sense."

The book would not have been possible without the efforts of Dr. James George. His tireless efforts at researching, writing and organizing the materials in this practical, informal format have made my job of editing much easier and enjoyable.

This is Volume 1 No. 9, the NINTH book of a 10 Volume series in various subjects produced by the University of Southern California School of Pharmacy, as an ongoing continuing pharmacy education project under the direction of . . .

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Effective Communication: The Who, What, Where, When, Why

James L. George, Ph.D.

I. Objectives

At the conclusion of this chapter, the reader should be able to

- 1. Identify various reasons why the ability to communicate is so important.
- 2. Identify the difference between the content and technique of communication.
 - 3. Select various objectives of communication.
- 4. Identify problems or barriers that arise in the communication process.

II. The Course

Since the study of effective communication is not an exact science, the best I can do is share with you some of the conclusions I personally have reached concerning good (and not-so-good) interpersonal exchanges. They've been assembled especially for those whose careers are linked with medicine, nursing and pharmacy. Let me begin with . . .



What is communication? What makes it effective, or ineffective? Why do we have communication breakdowns? Can they be repaired? How? These are some of the questions we want to discuss in this section, because these are some of the things that plague us in the everyday performance of our jobs. We often hear that it's the "people problems," not the "thing problems," that cause most of our difficulties. Certainly this is true among doctors, nurses and pharmacists. And if it's true among yourselves, it's true between you and your patients and customers.

Importance of Communication

Through communication we move toward our goals, be they business, professional or personal. Try to imagine the kind of existence if we were to lose the ability to communicate with one another. A frightening thought!

But we don't have to be quite that dramatic. The *Harvard Business Review* carried an article titled, "What Helps or Harms Promotability?" [1] in which the responses of more than 2000 business executives were reported. Factors of promotability were condensed into a list of 19 items. Surprisingly, "technical skills based on experience" was ranked near the bottom, while "college education" fell just below the middle. Items such as "making sound decisions," "responsibility, conscientiousness," and "ambition, drive" appeared near the top. The very top, the number one factor in promotability, was "ability to communicate."

A recent survey [2] was conducted by Benedetto P. Greco, Director of Career Services at the University of Southern California's Graduate School of Business Administration. He queried MBA graduates about their "secrets to achieving career success." The factor receiving the highest priority rating was "developing the ability to communicate effectively on a one-to-one basis."

Another interesting survey was taken, this time among MBA graduates from Stanford. Results were reported in *Nation's Business* [3] and appeared under the heading "What You Need to Climb the Business Ladder." In answer to the question, "What qualities do most successful managers share?" respondees listed five items. "Oral persuasiveness" headed the list.

The point is a simple one. The person blessed with only a little between the ears but able to communicate that "little" is often ahead of the person who has a lot between the ears but is unable to communicate that "lot." A disturbing thought, perhaps, but one most of us recognize as a "fact of life."

Content vs. Technique

We have to be careful about keeping things in proper perspective when we're citing the importance of communication. Content, what we have to say, is no less important than technique, how we say it. But neither is it more important. We might as well resolve a lot of argument by trying to agree that content and technique are of equal importance.

The best analogy I've been able to develop for my own use goes something like this. Compare communication to a fine dinner, due to be served in an equally fine restaurant. Suppose the waiter is approaching your table bearing a tray of delectable steak and lobster. Just as he reaches you, he trips. Down goes everything with a resounding crash. The steak and lobster — the content itself — is just as good as ever. It's the technique that's ruined the fine dinner! The same thing can happen with communication. What is being said is of no more importance than how it is being said.

The Communication "Day"

We seldom stop to think about it, but 65% to 80% of our day is spent in communicating. That includes reading, writing, speaking and listening. One objective I have is to help you develop your own ability to be more flexible and adaptable to meet the specific demands of any communication situation. In our rapidly changing society flexibility and adaptability are two of the most valuable assets a human being can possess. To be able to use them in conjunction with the communication process is truly a remarkable attribute.

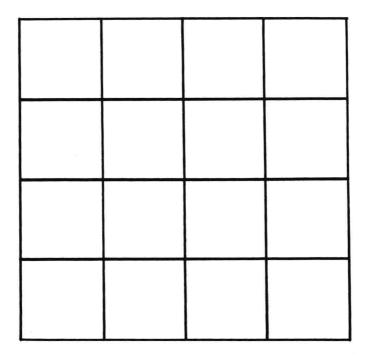
What Is Communication?

I've been using the word "communication" over and over. My assumption, just as it's probably yours, is that we all know what the term means. Even worse, my assumption may be that we all agree on a single definition. Hardly a reasonable assumption, yet it's the one most of us make every day. And that's precisely what starts many a communication problem as we deal with our fellow human beings.

I'm going to pause here and ask each of you to think about a definition of the communication process. What does it really mean to you? As you take part in daily activities with your fellow professionals, your patients, customers, friends, members of your family — what kinds of things are involved?

Maybe your first reaction to my question is, "Come on now, stop wasting my time! I already know a lot about communication."

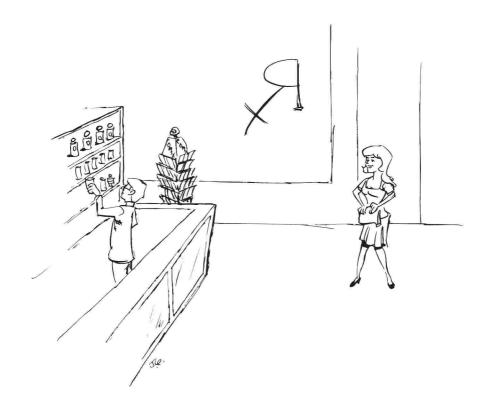
And of course we do know a lot about it. We'd have to or we wouldn't be where we are today. Again I ask you to stop just a few moments and think about it. And if your tendency is to be impatient with me, perhaps the "lesson of the squares" will be helpful. First of all, how many squares are there?



If your answer is 16, you're absolutely correct. Look at it even more carefully. Now, perhaps you're seeing 17, maybe 21, and if you keep looking, 24, 27 and finally 30. We can almost double the original count just by taking the time to see squares we haven't seen before.

If we look just as carefully at communication, perhaps we can almost double what we know about it. Hopefully we'll uncover some new thoughts, some different angles. Isn't this what definition is all about?

The process of communication begins with some sort of stimulus or event which acts upon the person who is to become the initiator. Suppose a woman enters a pharmacy and takes a piece of paper from her purse.



The woman reacts to the stimulus, the piece of paper, by formulating a thought in her mind. She then translates the thought into mental word images and a proposed nonverbal action. Within this split second she has become a sender, a source, an encoder of a message.



Now she must convey or transmit the message to the prospective receiver, her friendly pharmacist. Her verbal message is, "Would you please fill this prescription for me?" Her nonverbal messages include a smile and the physical act of handing the stimulus to the receiver.



The pharmacist has now become the receiver, the decoder of the messages. All that's left in the process is for him to respond, react, give feedback. In this case he too may decide on both a verbal and nonverbal message. Verbally he says, "I'll be happy to!" Nonverbally he adds a smile of his own and a nod.



No matter how complex our daily activities become, the communication exercises can always be reduced to just such a simple example as this. As soon as the receiver responds, the communication loop is complete. Actually I prefer the term "communication spiral," because it's a constantly changing, never-ending process. In fact, immediately after responding as the receiver in our illustration, the pharmacist might choose to continue the spiral by becoming the sender in the next exchange. Stimulated by his customer's friendly attitude, he might say, "If you'd like to browse around the store, I can have this ready for you in 10 or 15 minutes. I have one other order to fill." On goes the spiral.

Referring back to the cartoons, we can translate them into a word definition. Communication is the transmission and reception of a message, idea, feeling, attitude — verbally and/or nonverbally — which results in a response.

But we're not concerned with just any communication, for we constantly hear the word "effective." All of us strive for effective communication. And the thing that determines effectiveness is whether or not the sender gets his or her desired response.

The customer's desired response is to have the pharmacist answer in the affirmative. If he does, the communication has been effective. If he does not, the communication has been ineffective. So we amend our definition to read: Effective communication is the transmission and reception of a message — verbally and/or nonverbally — which results in a desired response.

If the sender does not get the desired response, what should be done? It's so easy for the sender to say to himself, "What's the matter with this receiver? I spoke in plain English, my message was a reasonable one, and yet this idiot won't respond the way I want him to!"

Yes, that's the easy way to react. Perhaps that's the usual way to react. When communication breaks down, when we the sender don't get the response we want from the other person, it's so easy to blame the other person.

Instead, let's develop the practice of looking first at ourselves. When communication breaks down, when it's ineffective, when we don't get the response we wanted, don't bother wondering what's wrong with your receiver until you've first taken a good look at the sender.

"What could I have done differently?" is the first question to ask. "Assuming my desired response is a reasonable one, is there anything I can still do?"

A very practical reason for looking first at ourselves, as senders, is simply that that's where most of our control is anyway. We don't have much power over our receiver, but we can certainly do a lot about the sender. And after all, it's the sender who has the desired response he or she wants to elicit.

Objectives of Communication

In addition to the desired response there are several other things we want to accomplish. In fact, we can say there are always at least three objectives in a communication exercise. First, we want to secure understanding as we (the sender) intend. Second, we want the desired response. Third, we want to build, maintain, retain a favorable relationship between sender and receiver. This has nothing to do with liking or disliking the other person. Sometimes we can dislike a person intensely, yet communicate very well with that person. Setting up this "favorable relationship" merely keeps the path open for future exchanges.

Breakdowns in the System

Sometimes our neat example doesn't turn out quite as we expected. Perhaps the response was not what the customer wanted. Maybe the pharmacist's reception was faulty which in turn affected his decoding process. Or perhaps the transmission was "off." Whatever and wherever the cause, breakdowns in communication occur. We label the cause of the breakdown a "barrier," and these barriers can be found anywhere in the spiral.

One encouraging thing about the barriers is that each of them can be turned, with a little effort, into a "bridge" or "pathway" to effective communication. It all depends upon what the sender wants to do. And incidentally, these barriers are the same ones that give us trouble at home as well as in our professional lives, with our friends as well as our business associates.



Let's take a look at a dozen of the more common barriers. The list is by no means exhaustive, nor is it exclusive. These are merely 12 of the more common barriers that cause breakdowns between you and your receivers.

Lack of Interest

Imagine that I'm talking with a group of you in person. There are men and women, old and young, well-educated professional people. well-educated professional people.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you're enjoying our seminar this morning. By the way, I forgot to announce that we're giving another seminar in this same room tonight from 11:00 p.m. until midnight. The subject is 'The Latest Accounting Principles.' You're all invited to attend this free meeting. Those who plan to attend please raise your hands."

I wait a few moments. Not a single arm goes up. A few more moments, still no hands.



Clearly I have a case of ineffective communication. I didn't get my desired response of having everyone to attend. What's the reason — the barrier? Maybe it's lack of interest.

The way to turn this barrier into a bridge is to *stimulate* some interest. And the way to stimulate interest is to appeal to the needs of our receivers. I begin to embellish my invitation.

"Those who attend the free seminar will be invited to enjoy beverage and refreshment service."

A few hands go up.

"There will also be drawings for door prizes and other awards."

A few more.

"Oh yes — I almost forgot — we're also going to have a caterer bring in that dinner of delectable steak and lobster!"

Still more.

"By the way, we can promise you that everyone who attends the seminar will be able to save up to one-half of next year's income tax!"