



How To Avoid 4 Communication Pitfalls




**Assumptions, Perceptions, Comparison
Expectations, and Commitments**



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I was recently talking with a good friend about how frustrating and difficult communicating with others can be. When we don't say anything, an assumption is made — and in most cases, it's negative. If we do say something, it may be perceived incorrectly. If that is not enough, there are all the “should” from others — their comparison expectations on how we should do something, or be something or live our life a certain way.

IN OTHER WORDS, *THEIR WAY!*

Because of assumptions, perceptions and comparison expectations we often make commitments to either do things we don't want to do or don't have time to do. Just writing this makes me feel exhausted! Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have to worry about all these communication pitfalls? But that is not reality.

Our success in life depends on our ability to communicate. Therefore, it is necessary to learn how to communicate and overcome these pitfalls regardless of how frustrating or difficult they may be. That is unless you interact only with animals and live on a deserted island!

I have found the best way to get good at something is to remove or overcome the obstacles. The rest of this article is dedicated to doing just that.

ASSUMPTIONS

Let's start with assumptions. *This one is a biggy!*

HOW CAN WE STOP MAKING ASSUMPTIONS? WE MAKE ASSUMPTIONS EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY. SOMETHING HAPPENS AND WE INSTANTLY ASSIGN MEANING TO IT.

THAT IS AN ASSUMPTION.

It may be correct or it may be incorrect. We won't know unless we take the next step. That step is asking. Sounds easy but it's not. We often fear that if we ask, we may open ourselves up to an emotional reaction. I call that emotional reaction an eggshell. Eggshells spawn many of the assumptions in our lives and in our dental practices today. It's the fear of these potential eggshells that stop us from asking and allow us to start assuming.

Some of the eggshells I am referring to are:

- Anger
- Judgment
- Retaliation
- Hurt feelings

We can't let fear stop us from asking if we want to avoid assumptions. We don't know what someone meant by their actions or words or the way they said something. Sometimes even what they say or the words they use can mean something different than what we believe them to mean. Stop making assumptions and start asking questions regardless of potential eggshells.

Action Plan: When you get that twinge in your gut and you think "Hmmm — I wonder what they meant by that?" Or you find yourself saying "I think they meant this" — you don't know! Stop yourself immediately from wondering and speculating and ASK! You will be surprised how many of your

initial assumptions are incorrect once you hear their intent.

Ask with care, concern and respect. A simple question to ask is "I am not quite sure what you meant, please tell me more?" or "I am not quite sure what happened. Can we talk about it?" Continue to respectfully ask questions until you understand the other person's true intent. If you are still thinking "I think they meant...", you are assuming and it is important ask more questions to achieve a deeper understanding.

PERCEPTIONS

Perceptions are next. They are just as dangerous as assumptions. Both the person speaking and the person listening play a role in perceptions. I often hear team members say, "I didn't mean it that way! They just took it wrong! So it's not my fault!" If you are always being misunderstood, it is important to reflect on how you are communicating. It is not just what you say that counts in communication. It is also how the message is being perceived. The listener bases their perception on the past experiences they had with you as well as your words, body language and tone of voice. They assign meaning based on what it would mean if they said or did that same thing, which in many cases does not accurately reflect the other person's intent. Inaccurate perceptions also happen when we don't hear the entire story or all the reasons or steps.

Action Plan: For the communicator to avoid false perceptions, it is important to slow down and take the time to clearly explain your intent. Ask the listener to give you feedback on what they heard and what it means for them. As the listener, ask questions until you are confident you know their intent and what they mean. Give your family, friends, co-workers and colleagues the benefit of the doubt and ask questions before assuming it was negative intent.

COMPARISON EXPECTATIONS

Expectations aren't a negative thing as long as they are realistic and not based on a comparison. Comparison Expectations create negative expectations. They are the "shoulds" that guilt us into doing things we aren't comfortable doing or feeling terrible about ourselves when we don't. We have all heard and even said, "You should....!" Comparison Expectations happen when we compare ourselves to others... or when others compare us to them. The comparison is what creates the expectations for who, what, when where, why and how we should do something based on what others do. Comparing is toxic; someone always loses. For example, if we learn another office is seeing more NPs than we are, we think we must see more. Or if a colleague makes more than we do, we may feel bad about our salary or unsuccessful, even though we were happy before we knew. We may even believe that others are wrong when they don't do something our way.


Comparison expectations can make us feel or do something of guilt. Guilt creates shame and shame inhibits communication because if we feel shameful about something, we are less likely to communicate openly and honestly.

Action Plan: Stop the comparison noise from yourself and others and quit “shoulding” on yourself and others! In other words, quit allowing the “shoulds” from yourself and others to dictate your actions, and quit expecting others to do things your way. Instead, start setting goals and live your life based on the end results YOU want achieve.

COMMITMENTS

We will end with commitments. There should be a group called Over Committers Anonymous! I know a few of you! Sorry - I just “shoulded” on you! Some of us were taught as children that being nice meant always saying yes. When we overcommit we are not being nice. We are dropping the ball by not being truthful about what we can realistically accomplish. Sometimes we have to say no before we can really say yes. Others may continue to ask us to do more and more. They don’t know nor can they regulate whether they are asking for too much. They have no idea what we already have on our plate. We have to tell them. Otherwise, we will allow others to use us to the point of exhaustion. The bottom line is that it is important to care for ourselves before we can care for others. A great analogy (for my fellow frequent fliers) is putting our own oxygen masks on first before assisting others.

Action Plan: Over committers, it’s time to under promise and over deliver. Instead of thinking “What is the quickest I can do this?” think worst case scenario and commit to the longer time frame. I am often asked to write articles for dental publications just like this one. If I know I can have it done in a week, I may ask for two to three weeks, as long as it doesn’t delay their deadline. Then, I finish early and I look like a hero! Stop creating fires for yourself by asking for more time. If your plate is already overflowing or the time limit is too tight, respectfully decline. If it is something you really want to do, remove something else from your plate and allow yourself room to say yes.



Our success depends greatly on how well we communicate in our personal and professional lives. When we communicate openly, honestly, respectfully and with understanding, we can avoid false assumptions, perceptions and comparison expectations and instead make commitments that we are excited about and can achieve!

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