

## **Eliminating Tension, Misunderstandings and Gossip Elevating the Level of Communication**

By Judy Kay Mausolf

Its 7 AM and everyone is at the morning huddle. That is everyone except for *Alienating Ann* who doesn't feel it is necessary for her to be there. *Doctor, I Just Want to Do Dentistry*, starts out by going over the schedule for the day. Without looking up, he asks if there are any questions. He never noticed that *Bashful Betty* had raised her hand only to quickly lower it when she see's *Critical Cathy's* raised eyebrows and *Provoking Patty* whispering to *Gossipy Gail*. Just another successful morning huddle.... How many of these characters show up at your huddle?

***George Bernard Shaw said it best when he said, "The problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished."***

The lack of effective communication is the number one problem faced by most dental teams! In many practices, the team members do not talk to each other. Instead, they talk about each other. The tension, misunderstandings, and gossip escalate to a level where no one not even the doctor wants to come to work. The sad truth is this can happen to even the best of teams when certain behaviors are left unresolved.

So, how can you avoid this from happening in your office? How can you take your communication to a level that eliminates tension, misunderstandings and gossip and pulls a team from good to great every time! Here are five fundamentals that can elevate the level of communication in your practice. They spell out the word S.P.E.A.K.

1. **S**etting Communication Guidelines
2. **P**reventing Breakdown
3. **E**nding Conflicts
4. **A**ccountability and Monitoring Results
5. **K**eeping a **K**ulture of Acknowledgement

**S** stands for setting *Communication Guidelines*. Setting *Communication Guidelines* is all about establishing guidelines of

behavior for what you say and how you say with your words, body language and tone of voice for all your daily interactions including your staff meetings and morning huddles. It is imperative for the entire team to establish the guidelines together for appropriate behavior for the practice. I suggest using a flip chart to write down all the ideas. Some examples that you could give your team members to get them started are:

- Only one person talking at a time
- Avoid rolling of the eyes if you disagree with something
- No one allowed to pollute the environment with negative energy

Once you have completed your list of communication guidelines, print and frame them and display in your meeting room. They are important to review as a team whenever you hire someone new or someone's behavior deems it necessary. It is so important to establish protocol on how to address inappropriate behavior before it happens. This will enable everyone to feel comfortable to hold each other accountable.

At the 7 AM morning huddle, many behaviors were inappropriate and stopped communication. Alienating Ann did not even show up. Doctor I Just Want to do Dentistry was tuned out. Bashful Betty was so timid she could not say a word. Critical Cathy's raised eyebrows were up to the ceiling. Provoking Patty and Gossipy Gail were having their own little conversation. They were not even aware they were at the morning huddle.

It was their body language that stopped communication. Body language is so important, which is why it must always match your words. Otherwise, only 7% of what is said is actually retained. Fifty-five percent is body language and 38% is tone of voice. For tone of voice to be effective, it should have four equal traits. The four traits are friendly, empathetic, enthusiastic and knowledgeable.

***Oprah said, "We are all responsible for ourselves, you create your own reality by the way you think and therefore act"***

The **P** is for *Preventing Breakdowns by Identifying Stumbling Blocks*. The number one stumbling block is *Different Personalities*. When we interact with someone we are always coming from a place filled with our own experiences. Our expectations will differ because of our unique and individual beliefs, opinions and assumptions based on our unique and individual experiences. These become our personal truths. Because of our unique and individual makeup, we do not look the same nor do we expect to. Why then if we have unique and individual experiences would we expect each other to think, act and respond the same? We have false expectations that get us into trouble. We think that others must behave in the same manner as we do or their behavior is wrong! We think a co-worker's behavior must mean what it would mean if we did that same behavior. For example, if a co-worker doesn't say goodbye to us before leaving at the end of the day they must be angry or upset, because we know we would never leave without saying goodbye unless we were angry or upset. These are our own personal rules of behavior yet we expect others to know, understand and adhere to them. How could we possibly know each other's expectations unless we talk about them? Establishing communication guidelines for our practice gets everyone on the same page and eliminates tension, misunderstandings and gossip.

The second stumbling block is the "*Poison Triangle of Mistrust*". It is lethal to team communication also. What happens is one team member has a misunderstanding or concern with another team member and tells it to a third team member. In many cases the reason the team member does not go directly to the person they had the problem with was because they did not want to hurt their coworker's feelings. Instead, the tension builds until one day they start talking about it to another coworker. This happens many times without the team member really understanding the full implications caused by their action. They have just created a poison triangle of mistrust. A poison triangle of mistrust occurs when one person, having an issue with a second person, takes that issue to a third person. What some refer to as "talking behind your back". When there is an issue with a coworker, it is important to go directly to that coworker and respectfully discuss the concern. If that does not resolve the issue, the next step is to take the concern to your manager or doctor, whoever is responsible for conflict resolution in the practice. It should never be shared with another coworker at the

office even if it is just to release tension; otherwise, there is the risk of creating a *Poison Triangle of Mistrust*.

***Bernard Gimbel said, "Two things are bad for the heart - running uphill and running down people".***

The third stumbling block is the lack of *Personal Responsibility* for what goes on in the working environment. It is time to forget the victim role. It is up to every team member to take ownership of his or her working environment. They can make it or break it. B.J. Gallagher and Steve Ventura wrote about the 10 most important phrases of personal responsibility. Once the entire team embodies the 10 guidelines, they will create an office culture of *Personal Responsibility*.

- 10 - I won't wait for others to take the first step.
- 9 - If it is to be, it's up to me
- 8 - If not me, who? If not now, when?
- 7 - Let me take a shot at it
- 6 - I will not pass the buck
- 5 - You can count on me
- 4 - It is my job
- 3 - Just do it
- 2 - I will
- 1 - Me

**E** is for *Ending Conflicts*. To end conflicts everyone needs to be involved. It is imperative that the entire team meet and agree to communicate openly and honestly. In most cases, everyone in the office has already heard about the conflict and has chosen sides. This also prevents further gossip as there is no one left to tell. Next as a team, evaluate the conflict by reviewing the communication guidelines. Where did the breakdown happen based on those guidelines? What behavior was not appropriate? As a team, agree on a solution, resolve and move on. The only way for the team to evolve is for the entire team to let go of the past grievances (baggage) and wipe the slate clean.

**A** stands for *Accountability and Monitoring Results*. It is important to hold everyone equally accountable for his or her behavior. There should be no exclusions; otherwise, it will divide the team. Analyze and monitor behavior in all daily interactions including morning huddles and staff meetings. Morning huddles are an ideal venue to talk about how things are going. What is working and what is not. They are not to point the finger at anybody. They are simply to find out what created the breakdown. As a team, resolve the issue and discuss how to avoid having the same breakdown happen again. When the team resolves issues on a daily basis, they will prevent tension, misunderstandings and gossip. The issue will be resolved before small misunderstandings turn into large conflicts. The office environment will become one where everyone is helping everyone to succeed and poor performance will be unacceptable by the entire team.

**K** stands for *Keeping a Kulture of Acknowledgement*. To create a kulture of acknowledgement, it is necessary to *know* and *be aware* of what is going on in the practice . Even the small things are important. Know when other team members achieve objectives and goals both individual and as a group. Then acknowledge the other team member with verbal rewards or verbal *kudos*. Some great acknowledgement reward phrases are; I am proud of you, great job, way to go, thank you, or just kudos. In a very short time everyone will began to feel recognized, important and cared about because their being seen and praised on a daily basis. I love this acknowledgment stuff because it really works. You can start immediately and you don't need permission to start. It only takes one person to get the ball rolling in the right direction. Start by giving verbal kudos for everything that is right about the office. A key management principal is "you get what you reward". So reward ownership, personal responsibility, good moods, good attitudes and even just a smile! For example, Betty the receptionist takes great notes on an emergency call. The assistant could say, "Thanks Betty for the great information on the emergency patient. I was able have the set up ready and it made the appointment flow very smooth". Can you imagine how good this will make Betty feel? Do you think she will try to do even a better job next time? You bet she will! In addition, share her great work with everyone at the next days huddle. The

focus will be on what is right in the practice and create a positive atmosphere at the huddle.

***Mario Fernandez said, “Rain and sun are to the flower as praise and encouragement are to the human spirit”***

Embrace the five fundamentals of S.P.E.A.K and elevate the level of communication in your practice. You will create an environment where the team is focusing on the positive and what is right with the practice instead of the negative and what is wrong. The office will become happy, healthy and balanced. The tension, misunderstandings and gossip will be gone, and once again, everyone will be excited to come to work! Including you! The end result now is.....

Its 7 AM and **everyone** is at the morning huddle. Everyone including *Agreeable Ann* who knows it is very necessary for her to be there. *Doctor Tuned In I Care About You* starts out by going over the schedule for the day. Looking up, he asks if there are any questions. He notices that *Brave Betty* has raised her hand and kept it raised when she sees *Complimentary Cathy’s* encouraging smile. *Polite Patty* is waiting her turn to talk after *Gracious Gail*. Just another successful morning huddle!