



Effective Communication Skills:

The Key That Unlocks Every Door

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The Power of Effective Interpersonal Communication Skills

Effective communication is vital in all parts of our lives, professional and personal, yet so few people take the time to build the necessary skills to fully reach their potential. Before we begin exploring this subject further, let me ask a few general questions:

- You have spent years developing, and continuously improving, the knowledge, skills and expertise to be a successful hearing aid specialist but are you fully pre-pared to effectively communicate with your patients and their families to satisfy their needs and exceed their expectations?
- Many of you have invested thousands of dollars to hire and train staff to assist you in the daily operations of your practice. Are they able to properly represent your practice, including the vision, integrity and professionalism your practice demands?

- Now that you are a successful professional in the hearing health industry, do you have the tools and techniques needed on a personal level to successfully interact with your family, friends and professional acquaintances?

Regardless of how you answered the above questions, the reality is we sacrifice for years developing our careers and building successful businesses but rarely take time to hone our communication skills – or help our staff fine-tune theirs. This can be detrimental to our success and there are plenty of studies to prove it. Let's look more closely at what a few studies have found concerning effective interpersonal communication skills.

In 1984, Stanford University completed a 20-year study of its most successful MBA graduates and discovered the single most important skill leading to their success was effective interpersonal communication skills.³

practice management

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Surprisingly, these graduates did not identify strategic marketing, sales techniques, cutting edge technology systems, accurate accounting processes or even operational efficiencies as key ingredients to their success.

Many other studies over the years, some more recent, have proven there is a fundamental need for effective interpersonal communication skills. To further demonstrate, take a look at some of the dramatic findings below:

- 80% of all challenges in the workplace can be traced back to misunderstandings.³
- 80% of people are hired for their education, experience and skills; however 85% of people are terminated because of their lack of leadership or people skills.⁴
- Even outside the workplace, “lack of communication” is to blame for 95% of divorces.⁴

So, what is the answer?

Even in this fast-paced, multi-tasking, technology driven world we live in today, effective interpersonal communication skills still command the position of being the single most important key that will unlock the doors to prosperity, growth, strong relationships and personal well-being. Ultimately, the professional who invests the time and energy required to develop effective interpersonal communication skills will prosper and the patients they serve will benefit as well. And, when they then pass those skills on to their staff and colleagues, success within their practice will be obtained much easier.

Interpersonal Communication 101

The following is a very basic snapshot of what critical communication skills are and how you can begin achieving them.

Developing Mutual Understanding

The ultimate goal of effective communication is to achieve “mutual understanding” as opposed to “mutual agreement.”² While mutual agreement is a wonderful achievement, it is not the ultimate goal. In fact, it is completely acceptable for two individuals to continue to disagree at the end of a conversation as long as they have reached a mutual understanding – even if they simply “agree to disagree.”

Content vs. Process

There are two basic components of effective communications: content and process. Content is “*what*” we are communicating and process is “*how*” we communicate.¹

A person may have extremely critical information, or content, that they are trying to convey to another person however if they do not focus on the process, or how, they communicate that message, they are at great risk of ineffective communication and they will likely fail to reach a “mutual understanding” with the other person.

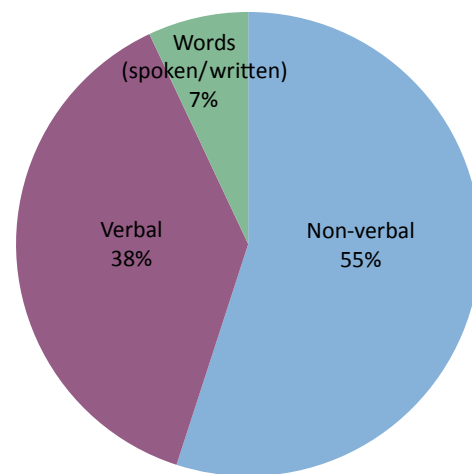
We often see this happen between a hearing healthcare professional and a patient. After the audiometric testing has been completed and the results show the patient suffers from hearing loss (content) the provider attempts to communicate the results to the patient (process) but there is a breakdown

and the patient does not understand what the provider is saying about their hearing loss. Too often, this can lead to frustration for both the patient and the practitioner and may result in the patient refusing to address their hearing loss.

Key Elements within the Communication Process

There are three main elements to the communication process and while each represents a different share, all three are critical to the effectiveness of the process.

Communication Process



Non-verbal Communication

It has been found that non-verbal communication plays a critical role in the effectiveness of communication and actually accounts for 55% of the entire communication process. Your body language sends messages to the person you are trying to communicate with and can very often can be misread. This is why customer service operators and telesales professionals, who never come face-to-face with a customer, may keep a mirror at their desk to reflect their body language, or to help remind them to smile during each call. It has

been suggested for many years that the customer really can hear a smile! Likewise, as a healthcare provider your body language is critical when interacting with a patient; particularly if they are apprehensive about seeking help for their hearing loss, because it can directly affect the outcome of their care.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication contributes to 38% of process, less than non-verbal skills but still very important to the process. Very easily an individual can change the meaning of a word, or direct the tone of the conversation, by simply altering their pitch, tone, volume, rate of speed or inflection in their voice. For example, I may very sincerely say to someone, “I’m sorry” after accidentally stepping on their foot in a crowded room. However in a different scenario, when my wife catches me eating too many cookies that were intended for our arriving guests, I may sarcastically reply, “I’m sorry,” in an attempt to escape her comments. The words are the same in both scenarios; but the meanings are very different. In the first situation, I truly am very sorry in my apology however in the latter instance I’m simply sorry I got caught.

While the example used is a silly one, it does demonstrate the power of verbal communication. If a patient senses you are insincere with your words, or perhaps you are talking too quickly, you may be creating an instant barrier to further effective communication with them. Remember that keeping an eye on their non-verbal cues can also help guide you determine if you’re communicating appropriately with them.

Words: Spoken or Written

The actual words we speak, or write, have a much smaller effect on the communication process accounting for only 7%. Even though the percentage is so small, it is still very important to remember that people judge us by our words and we should always choose them wisely. In today’s world, we rely more and more on our words through email and text messaging. These communication mechanisms are fast and convenient however they remove the two key elements that make up 93% of the communication process so extreme care should be taken when choosing the words. This one is particularly important to remember when communicating with your staff.

Conclusion

Although this article is only an introduction to effective interpersonal communications skills, it is a refresher of some very important principals. The number of books, articles and resources on the internet on the topic of communication are endless however practice and excising common sense and courtesy also go a long way in sharpening your interpersonal skills. As a veteran communications professional I strongly believe that individuals who acquire the knowledge of, and who develop effective communication techniques will be best positioned to excel and achieve great rewards in their professional and personal life. ■



Bruce Mow holds a degree in Interpersonal Communications and an advanced degree in Administration. He is a speaker and training facilitator who travels nationwide equipping key leaders with the tools to help them achieve maximum success. He is also the Executive Director for the Oklahoma Hearing Aid Association and participates in the hearing healthcare industry at state and national levels.

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