

still another consists of misdirected kindness or sometimes fear of confrontation, which causes one to soften a message to the point where it becomes a nonmessage without point or effect.

When common barriers are encountered and especially when anger is generated, the stage is set for communication failure. More often than not, one party will find it necessary to shut down and back away without resolution. Perhaps even more frustrating, however, is the situation that occurs when participants are operating at cross-purposes and the interchange could proceed indefinitely without resolution. It is only when parties are communicating respectfully with a shared objective in mind that mutual understanding is likely to result.

LISTENING

How much of the talking do you do in any interchange with an employee? This is a valid question because you cannot truly listen while you are talking. Of our four verbal means of communication—writing, reading, speaking, and listening—listening is the single communication skill for which the least amount of solid, practical help is available. Writing, reading, and speaking are all active processes; to engage in any of these it is necessary to decide to do so and take the appropriate action. Too often, however, listening is treated as passive; one can hear without conscious effort, but without the deliberate application of honest effort true listening cannot occur.

Although listening skills are not easy to describe or define, these skills can nevertheless be learned. Conscientious attention to the following suggestions and precautions can make you a better listener.

Be Attentive

Deliberately concentrate on what the other person is saying. Do not turn off the speaker as uninteresting or forego close attention to the subject because you "know it already." Some people speak in ways that fail to grab and hold your attention automatically, and if you are really to listen to what is being said, then you will find it necessary to apply some conscious effort. Knowing that your forced attention may be required is often more than half the battle; the remainder becomes a matter of actually applying your undivided attention. Also, keep in mind that even though a topic may not seem interesting or important to you it usually is important to the person doing the speaking.

Wait Before Responding

All but trained listeners are likely to rush their responses by reacting to only a portion of what is being said. The temptation is great; you hear a few words that trigger a response in you and your mind begins to race ahead and form the comment you will deliver as soon as the other person pauses. Resist this temptation. While your mind is busy forming your response, your

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listening capacity is reduced, sometimes to the point where you will interrupt the other person. Instead, deal with one complete thought or idea at a time, hearing the person out completely before offering a response.

Get the Whole Message

Many people have a habit of listening only for "facts"—specific bits of information. Facts are useful, of course, but their usefulness is diminished if they are not considered within the context of the entire message. Listen to the whole message before making decisions or rendering judgments.

Keep Interruptions to a Minimum

If you can possibly avoid doing so, try not to interrupt the other person to offer a correction of something you think has been improperly stated. Certainly avoid interrupting to offer advice or to scold or otherwise criticize. This is especially important in face-to-face communication within the supervisor-employee relationship. Generally, interruptions are in order only if you make them to ask for expansion or clarification of something that has been said or to ask related questions intended to encourage more relevant comments.

Be Aware of Your Emotional Sore Spots

While you are listening, be aware of the possibility of emotional reactions within you. As noted earlier, it is possible that the other person will unintentionally trigger an emotional reaction in you. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt and force yourself to concentrate on the message as being distinctly separate from its emotional overtones. You cannot help what you feel, but you can control what you do with those feelings. If you allow negative feelings to come to the foreground and dominate your reaction, your listening capacity will be sharply reduced.

Summary guidelines for effective listening appear in **Exhibit 9-1**.

Exhibit 9-1 Guidelines for Effective Listening

- Remain attentive; deliberately concentrate on what is being said.
- Wait before responding; hear the person out before judging or answering.
- Listen for the whole message, context as well as facts and data.
- Take in not only words, but also vocal tone, facial expression, and body language; these nonverbal cues are often the largest part of the message.
- Interrupt as little as possible and then only to ask for needed clarification.
- Know your emotional "hot spots" and keep your temper under control regardless of what you hear.
- Keep note-taking to a bare minimum; writing detracts from listening capacity.
- At the end of the other person's message, or periodically throughout a lengthy interchange, feedback what the other party has said in your own words and seek agreement or clarification.

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DIVERSITY IN THE ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONSHIP

An Inevitable Concern

Chances are that the majority of people who presently are or will become healthcare supervisors will manage increasingly diverse work groups. The diversities encountered in the workforce may be rooted in ethnicity, religion, race, gender, or social differences, but in the work organization we have essentially gathered all of these areas of difference under the single term *cultural diversity*. This term suggests a broad range of differences, also implying, for example, differences in values, assumptions, expectations, and needs.

Labor projections offered during the 1990s told us that during the first decade or two of this new millennium the majority of new entrants into the workforce would likely be women, minorities, and immigrants. This has become true in a number of areas of health care.

It is reasonable to assume that the majority of people are most at ease around people who look, think, and act as they do. However, these days rarely do people of a single cultural group populate an entire function, department, or organization. Rather, it is common to find most employee populations culturally mixed to some extent. It is lack of understanding of the differences between and among cultures that gives rise to difficulties for the manager.

Workplace tensions often arise from failure to recognize or understand cultural differences, and these tensions can cause interpersonal conflict, reduced productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and even charges of discrimination and other legal complaints. In addition, communication problems arise from language and literacy concerns related to individual background, and other concerns develop from lack of cultural awareness and respect.

In the workforce in general it is now and will become increasingly more necessary to interact with people who hold different values and believe in different ways. Increasing diversity in the workforce is unavoidable, especially in health care. In health care, diversity exists at all working levels. But in health care, cultural diversity is greatest in the lower-paying or entry-level jobs such as housekeeping workers, nursing assistants, and food service staff, among others.

Recognizing Our Differences

In the absence of knowledge of cultures other than our own we incline toward stereotypes in our thinking about others. Although stereotypes are usually superficial or simply wrong, they nevertheless tend to influence our thinking and decision making.

A manager should be able to respect each employee as an individual and hold all employees to the same standard of job performance. Yet in the one-to-one relationship between manager and employee, the manager must recognize individual differences that are culturally based. A few examples of differences you may encounter as a manager follow:

- In some cultures prolonged, direct eye contact is acceptable; in others it is considered rude and improper.

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