



For you, your career, and your life

Vol. II No. 1 Resident Assistance Program Newsletter April 2005

How Good Are My Interpersonal Skills, Really?

Is it important to get feedback on how you come across to patients, staff and colleagues? Yes, say communications professionals, and they offer examples of what happens when doctors communicate poorly. They also offer tips on the best ways to solicit feedback that you can act on right away.

Patient Rebels Against Brusque Treatment

"I fired my gastroenterologist a couple years ago," says Sandra Zimmer, a Houston-based professional communications and public speaking coach. "I believe he was a very good doctor, but I would have to spend an hour and a half in the waiting room and another half hour in the exam room to see him. Then he'd blow in and out in less than five minutes. I stuck with him about a year, and finally I confronted him about my dissatisfaction. He got very irate with me, and said, 'Well, if you don't think I'm doing a good job, you can go somewhere else.' So he lost my business."

"Other patients may not be

that bold," says Zimmer. "But as a communicator myself, I expect to have good communications with the professionals I rely on. This doctor didn't want my feedback, and I probably didn't communicate it very well, because of my built-up anger. But I think the interpersonal communication problem was systemic in his office, because even his assistants had a similar hurried style."

"Physicians tend to be very bright, very smart, and very quick," Zimmer adds. "But it's important when they're dealing with patients, their families and staff, to slow down. Brusqueness is very damaging to a physician's relationships with patients and their staff."

Zimmer has since found a gastroenterologist she is much happier with. "My current doctor is willing to spend a lot more time listening, answering my questions or explaining a process, and it's made a big difference," she says.

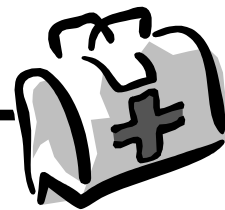
"When you treat a person with disregard, or with what they interpret as disregard,"

Your Resident Assistance Program provides not only counseling but personalized coaching and an extra measure of support to help you become a more successful physician. We're a ready resource for problem-solving, goal-setting and fine-tuning your interpersonal communications skills. We welcome you to get to know us. Call the Resident Assistance Program (RAP), 813-870-3344.

CONFIDENTIAL

trouble is almost guaranteed," says Rick Brenner. Brenner's Boston-based company, Chaco Canyon Consulting, helps organizations improve their effectiveness, especially during dramatic change, unanticipated emergencies and high-pressure situations—all typical of a physician's work environment. "Patients, just like everyone else, want to be seen as the human beings they are, and they want to be treated with respect and

Continued on next page



The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.

—Rachel Naomi Remen



Money Matters

Planning for the Unthinkable—Would You Know What to Do?

Kim Fults, Muniz and Associates, Inc. shares a true story that serves as a reminder of the importance of communication between spouses about their personal finances.

“Our client was a 37-year-old mom and wife. She was traveling with her 12-year-old son and his best friend from Brooksville to Orlando. An erratic driver coming from the opposite direction suddenly spun out of control directly into the oncoming traffic — our client. She was killed instantly and her son's friend was dead by the time the paramedics pulled him from the wreck. Her son survived, but has undergone multiple surgeries since.”

“Tragic as all of that is, the tragedy has continued at home,” says Fults. “Our client had always taken care of the family's finances. Her husband, a fairly intelligent guy who isn't yet 40, had no idea who to write the check for his car payment and mortgage to, or even where the checkbook was. He's now dealing with doctors and insurance claims for the first time, because she handled all that, too.”

“It's always hard for any of us to imagine and plan for a worst-case scenario in our lives,” says Fults. “But much of the overwhelming aftermath of this tragedy could have been avoided with better planning and communication between the spouses about their personal finances.”

Questions? Call *Julio Muniz* or *Kim Fults* at **Muniz and Associates**, 813-258-0033.

www.munizandassociates.com

Interpersonal Skills, *continued*

regard,” says Brenner.

Other than patients firing them, there are other signals that indicate doctors may need to work on their interpersonal skills, says Zimmer. “If people are clamming up, you have trouble eliciting information, or if staff become cold or distant to you or to patients, you know there's something going on.” But unless you ask for feedback you may never know how you come across to your patients, staff and colleagues.

How to Get Useful Feedback

Choosing the right person to elicit feedback from is important, says Brenner. “Someone with lower status in the organization may not feel safe enough to give honest feedback. You may want to find someone similar in status in another department or group. It can be helpful to find a ‘feedback buddy’ at a time when no feedback is required. Try setting up a reciprocal situation, saying ‘I'm hoping we can do this for each other, respectfully and with care and honesty. I would like to rely on you to give me your honest opinion and advice and I'll do the same for you.’”

“It's important to ask permission,” says Zimmer. “Set the stage for the question. Ask in a way that directs the other person to give feedback for the purpose of helping you improve, as opposed to addressing what you are doing wrong.” She suggests wording that will elicit what you seek from employees, colleagues or patients.

“Start by saying, ‘I want to improve my communication and leadership skills. And sometimes we all have blinders on and can't see ourselves accurately. So I'm looking for some feedback from you, if you are willing, on how I can be a better communicator/manager/leader.’”

“Next, ask ‘What things can I do that would make it easier to work with me?’ What you're looking for here are *action items*, not criticism or critique. Asking open-ended questions will give you instructions on what to do.”

Since it can often be difficult for a current employee or colleague to respond, Zimmer suggests going back to people who have worked with you or for you in the past. “I recently met with my former office manager, who left me a year ago, and I know there were some negative feelings at the time,” says Zimmer. “I used the open-ended question format, and she gave me three or four suggestions to help future office managers feel more comfortable and appreciated. I was able to incorporate them that day with my current office manager.”

“Realize that it takes courage and confidence to ask for feedback and to respond to it,” says Zimmer. “So give yourself and the other person some credit for being willing to have that conversation.”

Resources

Rick Brenner, Chaco Canyon Consulting www.ChacoCanyon.com
Sandra Zimmer, The Self-Expression Center www.self-expression.com
RAP Newsletter Archives www.woodassociates.net/rap