Effective communication techniques for nurse managers

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Sometimes, being a manager gets to feel like a lonely job. Managers are in a position to point out problems, ask for changes, seek improved performance, and other tasks that involve approaching staff with what often isn't good news. How managers approach these potentially sensitive or difficult areas can make all the difference in how the situation turns out. Invariably, we communicate what we want through words; however, we're often under time pressure at work, causing us to operate in our verbal communications without taking time to plan our approach. We may impulsively choose words out of habit, without considering the impact on others. The focus is on getting the message out, the request made, the rule articulated, and then we must move onto our other duties of the day. Managers are sometimes surprised and annoyed that others didn't get the message. In fact, various expressions of distaste may surface after a meeting, such as shrugs, shaking of heads, frowns, angry looks, and expressions of irritation. You're just trying to do your job. Why don't they get it? Sometimes, we think others are overreacting to what's supposed to be just information. What's going on?

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Two aspects of effective communication

Effective communication involves two distinct aspects: adequately articulating our ideas and understanding the listening audience with whom we're communicating in order to perceive how they best learn and receive information. Managers are in a position of power in relation to those whom they supervise, so there's always a risk of intimidating others. Sometimes there's a tendency to talk down to people, which may lead staff to feel that a manager doesn't communicate respect to those in lesser positions. When people feel intimidated or talked down to, they react in a defensive way. In fact, most of us react with defensiveness automatically even if we're completely unaware of it, which can impair effective communication. If you strive to understand defensive reactions in others, you can escape power struggles and open a new realm in communication.[1] If managers are going to be effective in their communication, they must actively monitor themselves and their audience to determine whether people are becoming defensive in response to what they're saying.

Monitoring defensiveness

Monitoring defensiveness in communication is critical because when people become defensive, they focus on defending their positions and they tune out the speaker. No communication works when the listener becomes defensive. How do you monitor defensiveness? Questions are a good way to test out the receptivity of the listener. Asking questions of your listeners throughout a meeting can help you see whether you're getting the message across. However, you must also be careful when asking questions. For example, avoid body language that creates defensiveness. In addition, some words turn questions into statements. For example, if you ask, "Do you *really* feel that way?," the word really suggests that you don't believe the person or approve of what he or she has said.[1] It challenges the person to answer the question and, immediately, the person who must answer is going to be defensive because of the use of a word for emphasis. The same is true of superlatives, such as always, all, and never.[1] By avoiding mixed messages, such as questions that are statements of doubt or disapproval, you have a better chance of being effective in getting your ideas across. Using a neutral question, such as "Does this make sense?," is preferable to a personal one, such as "Is there anyone here who doesn't get it?" Personalized questions carry a higher risk of drawing a defensive response.

Understanding your audience

About 80% of people learn most effectively using visual means, as opposed to simply hearing words spoken to them. Knowing this, it's always preferable to put your

words in written form, rather than just saying what you want to communicate. Show them, don't just tell them. This is based on the concept of using a multimodal sensory approach to learning. What this really means is that all people don't learn just from seeing, just from hearing, or just from hands-on experience, and we're most effective when we use more than one method of communicating.

To understand this better, think about the difference between talking to someone on the telephone and talking to someone in person. When you talk face to face, you benefit from visual, auditory, and other sensory input from the speaker. Listening on the telephone gives us limited auditory information only. When you're the speaker, you want to go beyond just using words—your physical expression, body language, and posture can help convey the message. It's useful to be conscious of nonverbal communication as a tool to empower your words and reduce defensive responses.

Using metaphors and stories as effective tools

One effective way to help people learn is by using metaphors rather than simply stating facts or ideas. For example, if you say, "This won't work," you can communicate the concept better if you also say, "It would be like trying to put a square peg in a round hole." Use of metaphor to explain a concept makes it more memorable and acceptable to the listener. Metaphor also tends to make a message less personal. When your message is less personal, the listener is less likely to react defensively to it. Less defensiveness means less risk of a hostile response.

Another way to improve communication is to couch your message in the form of telling stories. In an employment situation, it might be effective to describe a person who had performed a similar job and how, with direction, that person was able to avoid making a costly mistake. For example, you could say, "This reminds me of Mary." There doesn't have to be a real Mary to get the point across. You're using the story form to describe what you want to accomplish and your character is doing what you want done. This is generally a better approach than simply telling everyone directly, "You'd better do it this way."

Lightening up the message

Much too often we take ourselves and our jobs too seriously. The stress of our daily work tends to weigh us down. Everyone likes to laugh; in fact, we don't do enough if it. So, the next time you need to communicate with your staff, start off the conversation with a joke.

Using humor in your communication is an effective way to de-stress the message for your coworkers. Humor can rapidly neutralize defensiveness or hostility from others. It's very effective to use your own life situations in communicating humorous events. This technique reveals your own personal comfort with yourself and reflects humility. It tends to remove the intimidation some feel in dealing with a supervisor or manager. Despite the serious nature of nurses' work, there's always room for levity somewhere. And, perhaps, serious work is where humor is needed the most.

Listening to yourself

People may become hostile when they don't feel respected, when they don't feel they have power in a communication, or when they don't feel they've been heard. A manager's tone of voice is crucial to communicating respect. An accusatory, demanding, or overbearing tone of voice is almost guaranteed to cause a hostile and defensive reaction in the person on the receiving end of the words. This may happen whether the words themselves are hostile or not.

It may be difficult to monitor how we sound. We really don't know how others hear us unless we ask them, which isn't something we usually do. You may be thinking, "I never do that." But you don't really know, objectively, how you come across to others whom you supervise. It's always helpful to record your voice and listen to the sound of it—the tone and inflection—especially if you must make a difficult announcement or present what's sure to be unpopular information.

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Digital recording devices are small, inexpensive, and easy to use. Mini recorders fit in a pocket—try one. The process of recording yourself in private gives you the opportunity to be objective about how you sound to others. It may seem silly, but it works. We recommend trying it before an important meeting or confrontation. Need to reprimand someone? Have to review an incident? Recording yourself can work very well to help you change or improve your voice tone and inflection, including the specific words you chose to use. It's a bit like giving an important speech in front of a mirror, but it goes a step further and lets you be the audience for yourself before you act.

You can literally listen to yourself by doing a recording that practices a difficult encounter. Playing it back will allow you to improve the way you perform on the job. The act of listening to yourself permits you to be more objective, rather than assuming that you're doing fine. Perhaps no one has ever complained about your manner of using words to communicate, but this doesn't mean there's no room for improvement. Many people are in habitual conflict in communication, but never talk about it. Wouldn't it feel better to have more cooperation and less defensiveness? Fewer defensive reactions from those you supervise means less stress in your day. It also raises the level of respect from your staff when you self-monitor and work at this often overlooked part of the responsibility you have each day.

To see ourselves as others see us

Most of us don't see ourselves as others see us, and we don't hear ourselves as others hear us. As with any form of personal improvement, the first step to growth in communication skill is to look at your own personal style of using words with others. This can be a conscious, rather than an unconscious, process. Sometimes, being a manager gets to feel lonely, but you can start doing something to improve your communication today. Raise your consciousness about your communication and enjoy more effective work relationships. NM

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