

## Interpersonal Communication: Challenges and Solutions

### Strategies to Improve Organizational and Individual Communication

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Few of us consider ourselves poor communicators. We share information and results at work. We try to collect the information we need to do our jobs, and we are available via e-mail and voicemail virtually 24 hours per day. Why, then, is poor communication consistently reported as a major concern by those working in or managing laboratories and by directors of clinical laboratory science (CLS) baccalaureate programs who work to enhance communication skills of students?

We interviewed technologists and their managers in the field about their communication issues. External communication challenges centered around providing correct information to non-laboratory personnel and ensuring they received it. This included communicating with physicians to clarify orders and reconcile them with laboratory protocols, ensuring results provided to registered nurses (RNs) are documented if they are away from a patient's chart, and dealing with physician-office phone messaging systems and finding a real person with whom to leave information. Internal communication issues centered on getting the same information to everyone in a department and following through on decisions made at department meetings. With many laboratories operating 24/7 over 3 shifts, it is a challenge to get everyone the same information. A senior bench technologist from a large midwest hospital told us that more is expected in every way. More laboratory tests are done more quickly and accurately with newer laboratory equipment, computers, and analyzers. E-mail and phone messaging systems help convey results, but the individual technologist is a human hub in the middle of the technology and information, and communication is a human function.

#### What is Communication?

The act of communicating involves transmitting and processing information between a source and a recipient. Because communication is a human activity, meanings, understandings, feelings, and perceptions all come into play. Each side may have a different perspective on what has been communicated. A message must be conveyed, received, and understood.<sup>1</sup> Berte<sup>2</sup> describes effective communication as a documented understanding of who is responsible for an action at a certain time.

Communicating critical results requires taking steps to ensure the message is understood correctly. Communication that is only spoken can be ineffective and cause delays in patient care. We have all heard horror stories about patients being misidentified or a blood type that was misunderstood and the wrong blood given.

Management thinker Peter Drucker believed that 60% of management problems arise from faulty communication, especially poor listening.<sup>3</sup> Listening skills take effort and concentration. Most of us think about our next response while the speaker is talking, often missing important points of the message. Drucker also said "The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said."

#### Communication Barriers

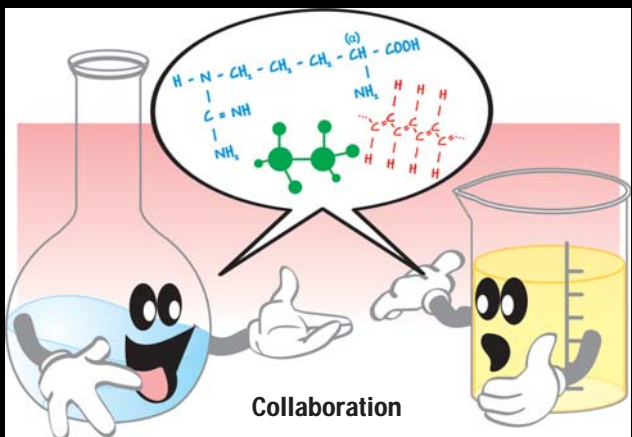
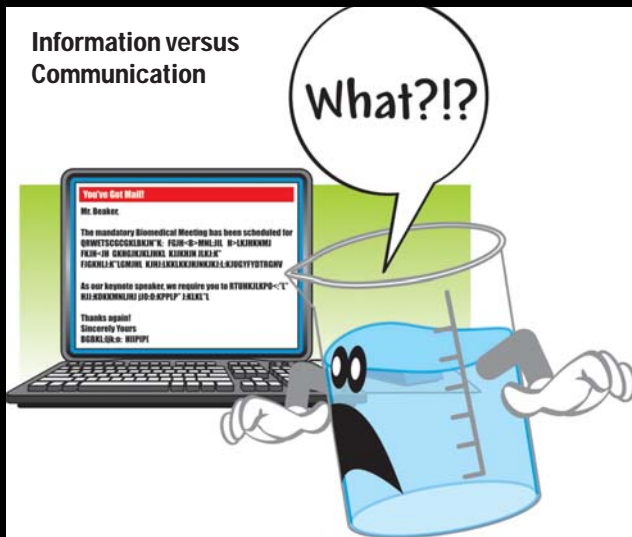
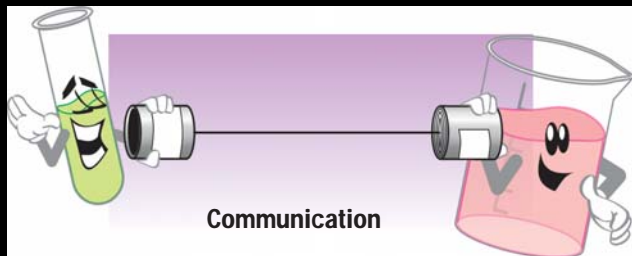
##### Barrier: Information Processing

Studies of communication show that human beings have unique strengths and weaknesses. We are sensitive to an enormous range of signals through our 5 senses; we are able to learn and store what we learn in our memories. The rate at which we process information is low, however, and the characteristics of our memory constrain communication with others. Because of the discrepancy between the rate at which language is spoken and our ability to process it through our senses, verbal communication is always at the edge of comprehension. The normal redundancy of language helps increase comprehension, and when there is much new information, or if the exchange takes place across barriers created by differences in culture or experience, extra effort is required.

Difficulties arise when we rely solely on e-mail or memos. When someone's inbox is overflowing, your important message might be accidentally deleted or buried and lost. In addition, incorrect addresses and large file sizes can prevent your e-mail messages from getting through successfully.

##### Solution

Communication rates need to be slowed and immediate feedback included for clarification. Redundancy helps and



we can increase redundancy through written follow-up documentation.

Communication is enhanced when we use multiple senses. This means that leaving a voice mail message or sending an e-mail is typically not as effective as face-to-face communication where there is opportunity for questions and feedback.

### Barrier: Information Versus Communication

Communication and information are often confused as being the same thing; however, communication is a process, and information is a state. Providing others with lots of data and information does not mean you have communicated.

### Solution

Follow up. Ensure the information has been received and understood.

### Barrier: Separation

Communication is affected by physical, functional, and cultural separation. Distances of 100 feet lead to a 6-fold decrease in communication.<sup>4,5</sup> Allowing random meetings to spark communication does not work.

### Solution

Managers must plan to avoid physical isolation. Functional and cultural differences are barriers because of the effort necessary to understand the needs of someone whose job, values, heritage, and expectations are different.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing that such barriers exist, and taking steps to lower them, will improve your communication.

### Barrier: Judging

Defensive communication is easily provoked, as research with small groups has demonstrated. Many authors have pointed out that, because communication is essential to survival, perceived threats are handled on a high-priority basis and result in a strong psychological reaction, which almost completely blocks informative communication. Attitudes leading to defensive reactions include perceived attempts to judge, evaluate, control, or manipulate, and coldness or aloofness or airs of superiority. The greatest barrier to effective communication has been described as the tendency to judge, evaluate, and approve or disapprove what another person is saying and, therefore, to misunderstand or to not really hear.<sup>7</sup>

### Solution

Suspend judgement. Listen to the whole message before evaluation.

### Barrier: Insufficient Skills and Training

In research on the 25 knowledge and skill areas considered most important for baccalaureate programs in CLS, 8 human-relations skills were tied directly to communication, including college-level oral communication, writing, and listening skills.<sup>8</sup> Consensus among the Association of Schools of Allied Health Professions (ASAHP)-member participants led to the conclusion that these results were useful in CLS evaluations and for modifying course work in a CLS curriculum.

### Solution

Efforts have been made to improve methods to teach communication and problem-solving skills, such as using clinical and management case studies.<sup>9</sup> Case studies provide active learning

where students can work with faculty and clinical advisors and then present their case studies to other students, staff members, and pathologists. This gives communication practice at all levels, from analyzing to communicating the details and the big picture. Alternatively, case studies can be developed with other medical disciplines. For example, teaming clinical laboratory students with pharmacy and medical students where the laboratory student researches a case and others contribute to the case from their own perspectives. This demonstrates the importance of working as a team to provide the best patient care. In addition, such multidisciplinary learning can help eliminate “us-versus-them” thinking, increase collaboration, and show the laboratory’s role in patient care.

If we spend time teaching communication skills to our graduates, if we expect it from our seasoned employees, and if advancing technology steadily provides us with more communication options, why then is communication still so often ineffective? Few of us make the time to become skilled communicators, or we assume that communication skills can never be a strength.

### The Good News

Experts are made, not born. Being a really good communicator takes commitment and practice—but it is possible. Ericsson gives many examples showing that expertise develops by deliberate practice—not from innate talent or skill.<sup>10</sup> Many of us who choose science and technology professions do so because we are attracted to the work itself or want to help others, not because of our communication skills. Yet effective communication is critical for job and career success.

Consistent successful communication requires commitment and a recognition of its importance. Without understanding or applying the basic laws of communication, many professionals remain ineffective and “invisible” throughout their careers. Not only does communication affect individuals in a personal sense, it has a pronounced effect on the organization. Communication is ranked by most executives as their most difficult nontechnical problem.

Communication patterns in traditional organizations tend to be formal and hierarchical; in laboratory environments, however, communication patterns need to also be horizontal, similar to those described for “network” organizations.<sup>11</sup> Such networking communication requires the abilities to bridge vocabulary differences, learn new frames of reference, meet people from other disciplines or specialties, and go outside one’s area of expertise—tasks many individuals find difficult. Such networking could affect a long-standing problem in the field of medical technology: a desire for recognition of the value of the work. Laboratory professionals are still hidden from the view of most staff members and patients. Many health care personnel are surprised by the amount of education and continued training required to do the job. Informal networking and communication by individuals can have a significant impact on perceptions

of medical technologists and how they are viewed by other professionals. Sharing information, asking questions, and demonstrating knowledge all have an impact. Informal contact between colleagues is a powerful source of influence and is generally underutilized.

### Improving Communication

#### Personal Communication

Communication is such a critical factor in job and career success, it is surprising that few of us actively examine and plan our communication strategy. Accept the need and make the effort to develop your communication skills.

*Plan* your communication.

*Listen* to others.

*Avoid* assumptions/ensure communication is understood.

*Network*.



#### Plan

Begin by identifying important communication targets. These may be individuals at work or in your broader professional network. Evaluate your current relationships and those you want to enhance. Which individuals could help improve your skills, expand your influence network, or serve as an honest sounding board? Convert these targets to allies through honest, consistent, and helpful communication and networking. Remember to keep messages to the essential information and always follow up.

#### Listen

In order to build listening skills:

- Concentrate and focus your attention; look for key points and the intent.
- Avoid evaluating or judging; keep an open mind.
- Demonstrate listening; use nonverbal signs of attention and understanding.
- Listen between the lines and for voice inflection, rate of speech, and nonverbal cues.
- Take notes—capture key words and ideas.

## Reports

### Avoid Assumptions

- Summarize to ensure understanding.
- Ask questions to clarify and amplify.

### Network

Kelly and Caplan<sup>12</sup> studied “star” professionals and how to improve productivity of non-stars. They dispelled myths that stars had special inborn traits and identified networking and taking initiative as work strategies that produced star performers in knowledge professions. They found that star performers do the work of building reliable networks before they actually need them and almost always get a faster answer when they call on their network.<sup>12,7</sup>

### Organizational Communication

Communication satisfaction is positively related to job satisfaction and performance.<sup>13,14</sup> Recognize that effective communication takes planning and training. Create processes to reduce confusion and clarify communication practices. Remember the impact of distance on communication. Allowing random meetings to spark communication does not work. Managers must plan to avoid physical isolation. They must also help to create the processes and structure to streamline communication.

Building good communication skills is not only achievable, it is critical for all of us who want to have an impact. LM

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