

## Teamwork Skill: Communication

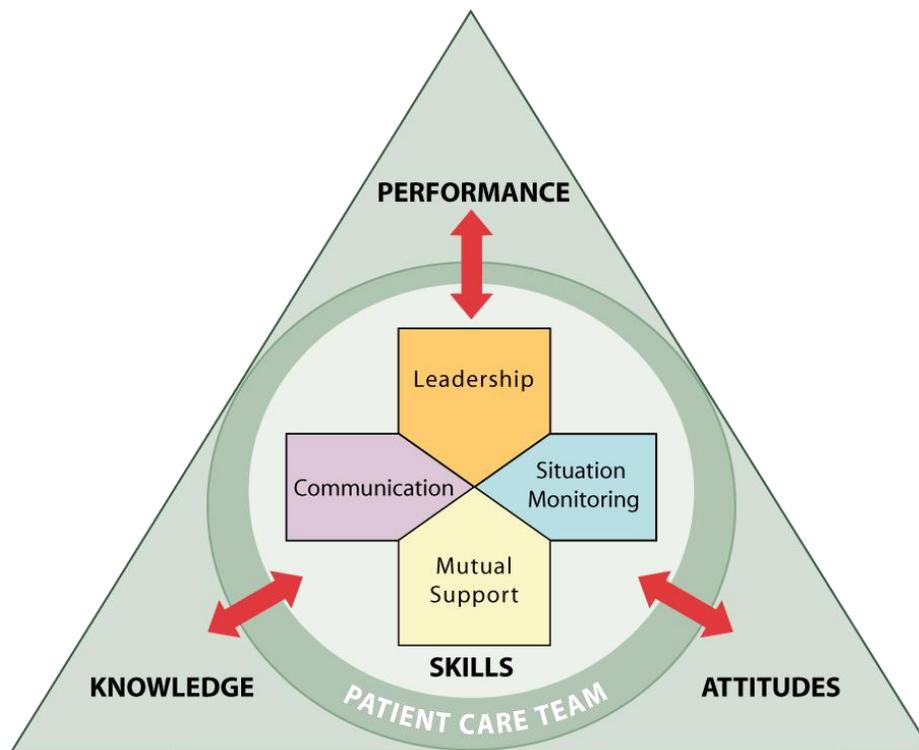
Executive Summary:

- Communication is one of the four essential skills of good teamwork
- Good communication techniques can be learned
- There are several elements of good communication, including good listening skills
- Good team communication helps insure good quality outcomes

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Communication is one of the four key skills for teams to master to be effective. The Team STEPPS online training modules introduced in my February 2019 newsletter focuses on building these four skills. This month I will focus on describing the essentials of the Communication module while adding some of my own thoughts and experiences.

Recall the Team STEPPS logo:



Teams that master communication skills while integrating it with the other three skills become effective in delivering service that is highly satisfying to clients and patients. Healthcare teams that communicate effectively deliver care that is safe and effective while building high levels of trust. This is the essence of a value-based care model.

How does Team STEPPS define communication? It is “The process by which information is clearly and accurately exchanged between two or more team members in the prescribed manner

and with proper terminology and the ability to clarify or acknowledge the receipt of information.” By adhering to the principles laid out in this definition, providers can avoid poor outcomes. According to Team STEPPS, poor communication is one of three root causes of sentinel events.

Consider this classic case of poor communication in a primary care office. The medical assistant comes into the exam room, takes vitals and asks why the patient has come in to be seen by the physician. The patient tells in some detail why she is there. The MA writes down what the patient says. Later, the physician comes in and asks why the patient came in. The patient wonders if the MA and physician even talked to each other and wonders about the inefficiency of the office. The occurrence of this miscommunication certainly erodes some of the trust the patient has for her care team.

Consider another situation in business marketing. Suppose a marketer at a conference develops a strong lead for his sales team; he enters contact information and notes into the CRM software. Some time later, after returning to the marketing department where he works he asks sales if they followed up on his lead. To his surprise, the sales team did nothing. A potential sale is lost. The trust of the marketer is eroded for the sales team.

What are some of the key elements of good communication that teams can develop to overcome these lapses?

**Method of communication.** All communication that is critical to safety and quality outcomes should involve face-to-face dialogue, or if this is not possible, a verbal exchange. Verbal exchanges allow for questions and answers, for checking to make sure the communication is understood. Verbal communication is paramount in the handing off of a patient from one shift to the next in a hospital setting.

**Consider your audience.** The language level should be tailored to the audience. For instance, a physician talking to a patient about test outcomes should be sure that the patient understands what is being said. The physician should not be using medical jargon that is beyond the comprehension of the patient. A physician talking to another physician can use language that is quite technical.

A team leader talking to team member at an auto manufacturing plant will want to ask in specific language what can be done to improve the flow of parts through the assembly process. Both team member and manager must have a comprehensive understanding of the current process of the flow and through communication understand what a better state of the process could be.

**Show respect. Listen.** Too often individuals think of good communication as ‘good speaking’. It is not. Listening is just as important, if not more so. Good listening empowers the speaker and shows respect. Good listening is hard and takes a lot of practice. Too often individuals speak more than listen in order to control the interaction or to avoid the awkwardness of silence. Nothing can be learned if there is no listening.

When I go to my physician for my annual checkup, he first says, “What would you like to talk about today?” He is empowering me to relate what is important to me and he is opening himself up to listening.

The principal of a school will attune his listening skills to teachers as they describe the challenges in providing the quality of results with students. He will consider the obstacles that they describe while repeating what he has heard and offering possible solutions.

Another key component of good listening as illustrated in the last example is the *checkback*. The principal, the one listening should always repeat some of what has been spoken to him to assure that he is accurate in his understanding of what he has been told. He can also ask for more details to bring further clarity to what has been related.

**Body language.** When speaking to someone or listening, look at them, position your body so they know you are actively listening. You should not be looking at a phone message or be distracted in any way. If you are communicating face-to-face, give the other person your full attention. Be kind and gentle, not rolling your eyes or smirking.

**What you say.** When it is your turn to speak, you will want to be effective. This is accomplished by being:

- Complete
- Clear
- Brief
- Timely

If you are a clinician describing test results to a patient, you will want to completely interpret the results in language that the patient understands. This should be brief while being accurate. If you provide too much detail the patient will not hear it all. Points crucial to the patient making a good decision about his care could be missed by the patient. Of course, information for the patient should be delivered in a timely manner so effective action can take place, if need be.

As you can see, effective communication is critical to good outcomes and for good teamwork. Effective communication in team settings must be practiced. I suggest that your team role play to develop communication skills. A team member can describe a situation in which he saw poor outcomes because of poor communication. Team members can be assigned roles to replay the event while other team members add insights as to what led to the poor outcomes and offer advice on how to improve interactions to insure better outcomes. Role playing should be done often to eliminate poor communication habits and replace them with more effective communication habits. Teams should continuously practice the development of good team communication skills.

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Mr. Bryant is certified by the University of Michigan as a Lean Healthcare facilitator and is a member of the Medical Group Management Association.

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