



Nursing Communication

Novice versus Professional

VERBAL COMMUNICATION: A “NO REFUND” HAPPENING

(Part II of a two-part series)

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF A CONVERSATION! YOU ARE THE MESSAGE—SO ACT, LOOK, AND BE WHAT YOU INTEND TO COMMUNICATE!

ACTIVE LISTENING AND DETERMINING CONGRUENCE

One of the most important skills you can learn is the skill of listening. This places your body into an attention mode. Body language, in general, changes with a slight leaning forward, eyes on the person object, and non-verbal responses confirming that what is being said is heard. Posturing and nodding of your head as a listener confirms a listening stance. These behaviors are considered congruent with the process of active listening.

Listening also means that the person who is doing the listening watches for the congruency of the person talking to note the differences (if any) between what is verbally said and what the body movement and posturing says. For a person to be heard correctly and wanting to be heard, the person doing the talking must be congruent in the message. That is, verbal and nonverbal are considered in agreement according to the culture of the individual.

Example

If a person is laughing while they are reprimanding someone verbally and perhaps raising a fist to hit that person at the same time, there is incongruence in the combined message and behavior. Such lack of congruence between verbal communication (laughing) and an accompanying behavior (hitting) brings to the attention of the listener that two confusing forces are being witnessed—happiness and anger. Such incongruence that sends overt mixed messages often presents a probable mental disturbance or instability.

Mixed messages cause confusion on the part of the listener; therefore, if possible, the behavior and the verbal message must be examined carefully by the listener in order to understand the intended communication/message (if there is an intended message).

MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATION

As a nurse, you will experience culturally diverse people. This is called a “global-centric experience.” Therefore, it is important to have a multicultural perspective on leadership and cultural literacy. There are differences between the western cultures and the eastern cultures.

The western cultures involve debate and discussion with low non-verbal content. Just think of the many times you have been called to a meeting for the purpose of discussing a topic of concern. It was the verbal exchange and the debate around the topic that was the driving force of the meeting. There finally was a tendency to get to the point of the discussion and make a decision.

The eastern cultures are more likely to use direct communication rather than discussion or debate. Their desire is to maintain and preserve the relationship. To help preserve the relationship, it is often difficult for them to say, "No." There is a tendency to talk around the point of discussion and not say what they mean. Yet, there is a tendency to finally get to the point of the discussion. Often, this gives the westerner a feeling of bluntness, rudeness, and procrastination. Information during a conversation is important between individuals—not necessarily groups.

There are some general multicultural recommendations set forth by the American Medical Association (AMA) to encourage and enhance multicultural communication. These are paraphrased as being:

1. Recognize that miscommunication is likely to happen when working with significant cultural differences.
2. Realize that miscommunication could lead to unwanted conflict.
3. Learn to adapt to different communication styles requiring adaptation.
4. Never shout.
5. Define meanings of words and phrases.
6. Learn to simplify the message to meet the cultural need.
7. Avoid non-standard abbreviations (such as "UR" for "you are").
8. Show patience with different logic.
9. Ask a person to repeat what he/she said or to say it in different words if you do not understand.
10. Get help to clarify the information when there is no one to interpret or you do not understand.
11. Note the distance a hand is extended when shaking hands to determine a person's comfort zone.
12. Give a person the benefit of the doubt when you do not understand. Consider alternatives to what you thought you heard.
13. Use several media types to impart information when doing presentations. Be sure that each type of media has the same message.
14. Offer to read documents they have written to ascertain understanding.
15. Have employees with English as a second language work directly with employees who speak English as a first language.
16. Have an employee who attends a meeting reiterate what he/she understands as the outcome of the meeting. Clarification could then occur if there is a misunderstanding of the outcome of the meeting.

It is important to realize that multicultural staffing or accepting multicultural persons in the facility/organization is challenging, yet a rewarding experience. The sharing of cultural insight can be stimulating and provide a unique learning experience for the entire facility.

CLARIFICATION

Sometimes when a person tells you something, the message is not clear. The most common response that helps to clarify the meaning is “I don’t understand.” Those words said immediately post the message tells the person that there is something wrong with his/her communication. It is better to identify that you do not understand (if that is true) than it is to continue with the conversation on a note of misunderstanding. It is important to explain WHY you do not understand. This clarification of why you do not understand helps the person focus on the exact information that will increase your understanding. Say what you mean *exactly* and mean what you say!!

Example

A police officer stopped a man carrying a penguin in the back of his truck. “Take the penguin to the zoo,” was the direction given by the police officer. “OK,” said the truck driver—and off he went. The next week -- there the truck was again with the penguin in the back of the truck. “I thought I told you to take that penguin to the zoo,” the police officer said. “I did” said the truck driver—“and now I am taking him to the rodeo.”

LIMIT-SETTING

There are times when a person needs to understand the parameters of behavior that are acceptable. By verbalizing what is acceptable with a limit, the person can continue behaving appropriately according to the limit. This often works well with children. There is a need for a child to feel secure and this control placed on their behavior provides them with a sense of security.

When working with adults that request something of you that is something you do not want to do or cannot do, the usual answer is “No.” However, if you will compromise (when appropriate) just a little and do a little something toward meeting their request, you project a feeling of cooperativeness with realistic expectations.

When you request a behavior, the key to success is that you say what you want to happen by limit-setting. You need to include in the limit-setting comments about what you DO NOT want to happen. This should be congruent with what you know about the person’s past behavior and testing behaviors.

POSITIVE STATEMENTS

Everyone likes to be around a positive-type person. A person who is a positive thinker and behaves in positive ways just seems to get through life’s trauma just a little easier. It is also catching. Being positive rubs off on other people—and THEY become more positive. After all, where does negativity get anybody in this difficult world?

The key to communication that makes people feel better is to recognize the good in them. We all have negative aspects, but how nice it is to hear the good about each of us!

Such statements that encourage movement of behavior in a positive direction might be: “I knew you could do it!” or “I know you can do it!” or “That is the best I have ever seen!”, or “Keep up the good

work!” There a million other statements that encourage positive behavior. The goal is to make positive changes in their lives because of it!

NONJUDGMENTAL

Everyone seems to have a barometer for expected behavior—verbal or nonverbal. We often act as if we know what is good, right, not so good, or terrible about situations other than our own. Remember that old adage about not judging another person until you walk in their shoes? There is a reason for every behavior. We, as individuals, try to understand, but cannot fully comprehend the actions or reasons for the behavior of another person.

Keep in mind that each person has had a path to walk (so to speak) in their lives, with obstacles leaving their impression on their mind and behavior. It is very difficult to understand different behaviors and their complexity as an outcome of life experiences. However, a person does what has worked in the past!

Wisely select your words—always use words of comfort or understanding. Words of anger or discouragement close communication lines, and then the helpful communication ends.

FALSE REASSURANCE

Too often the comment is, “Everything will be fine!” How do you, as a nurse, know that everything will be fine? Whose needs are being met when such things are said or inferred? Obviously, the nurse who makes that comment is the one reassuring him/herself. No—things are not always going to be fine!

Always take the time to listen to another person’s concerns. Your reassurance is not about what is going to happen to them, but that you, as a caring nurse, will be there for THEM regardless of what happens.

REDIRECTION

There are times when a person will want to talk about something that you do not want to talk about for some reason. You can listen to them, but you do not need to respond. The skill of redirection is to change the direction of the conversation to be something else. Often, you can take the topic that you do not want to talk about and turn a question back to the person by changing the topic completely. Remember—if you are skilled at this, you will not have to answer anyone’s question(s) presented to you unless you want to answer the question(s). (Haven’t we heard politicians do this?)

Use redirection in conjunction with the other skills described in this document. Skillful nurses put the emphasis on a person under their direction and learn to make the conversation about what is important to the other person.

HALO EFFECT—DEVIL/HORN EFFECT

This *Halo Effect* is a cognitive bias where perception of a person's total traits can be influenced by a perception of one or more stated *positive* trait(s). Individual reviewers would not see another person with mixed traits (good and bad). But, because of a group sharing of a previously established positive mindset, the person would be seen as totally wonderful. These positive traits of perception can be determined by verbal or nonverbal communication as set forth by another person.

In reverse, the *Horns/Devil Effect* is a cognitive bias where perception of a person's total traits can be influenced by a perception of one or more stated *negative* trait(s). Individual reviewers would not see another person with mixed traits (good and bad). But, because of a group sharing of a previously established negative mindset, the person would be seen as totally bad. These negative traits of perception can be determined and shared with others by verbal or nonverbal communication.

This happening is often seen in a job interview—or any other situation, for that matter. Also, when a person is considered for a job, it is not uncommon for the *first impression* (good or bad) to determine whether the person is hired. The contrast is: Where the Halo Effect is an outcome of just a mention of a shared previously established positive impression of a person, the Horns/Devil Effect is an outcome of just a mention of a shared previously established negative impression of a person. The mere influence of a group from even one person's comment (positive or negative) can influence and determine a final decision and/or change outcomes.

CONFRONTATION

Confrontation is an approach to communication that is often the most difficult for some people. It requires that you, as a nurse, have a good self-image and be fearless regarding the response of the other person. If the approach is accomplished with sensitivity and a desire to understand the circumstance you confront, it can result in a positive outcome. The key to success has to do with your ability to use all of the other stated techniques as you converse with another person toward a better understanding about what is going on and end with a resolution to an identified problem. It is alright to make a personal stand on a topic. It is better to share (than not share) your stand on a topic and try to understand the other person's stand on the topic.

If the person you confront becomes defensive, you just listen. If they have comments to make, you reflect and paraphrase. If you do not understand, clarify what you do not understand. Compromise is a common positive outcome. Sometimes, you just cannot win the total war—take a deep breath and compromise.

Remember, you do not confront another person to become argumentative, but to better understand and solve what you consider to be a possible problem. You WIN when the other person changes his/her mind or behavior to your liking because they, personally, made the decision to change—not that YOU insisted on the change.

THE POWER OF “YES”

When you first respond to a statement by someone else, try starting your response with “yes.” This gets the other person’s attention and they feel that you are listening to what they have said or want to say. There are a thousand ways to continue the conversation once the word “yes” has been said.

Examples

1. “Yes, I hear what you are saying; however, -----”
2. “Yes, tell me more about ----- “

RESPONDING TO THE MESSAGE

“Earth to Mars...Hello...Are you there?” Doesn’t a person feel like that when a message is ignored? Sometimes you are lucky to get a grunt from a verbal comment. Regarding e-mails: Sometimes sending a message of friendship is overlooked by others. The feeling is projected: “Well, what do you expect of me in return?” Yes—we all do expect something!! To tell a person in a few words that you heard what he/she said is known as “a courtesy response.”

At least look at the person who is trying to verbally communicate with you. Try—huh huh, OK, Ya, (at least) to a verbal statement. Even a more intelligent remark for either a verbal comment or e-mail would be very nice! Let’s face it—the more you actually and intellectually hear what is said and the implications of what is inferred the more likely you are to respond in an intelligent manner. Now, if you decide not to respond, isn’t that a message, too? If you have a question about the meaning of what you heard, read, or thought you saw, you better get some clarification. To hear a verbal message, try looking at the person as they speak and you will more likely hear the intended message.

The idea is that when someone directs communication your way (verbal, written, nonverbal, or even a product as a gift) there is a responsibility to respond—in some way. Ignoring in any situation is unacceptable. The outcome of ignoring is that the communication between individuals will eventually cease. As a nurse desiring to retain a powerful stance, this cannot happen. Listen to all aspects of communication, hear the message (actual or inferred), and respond professionally. Remember, *whatever you share* as an extension of yourself always carries a message.

RECIPROCITY AND FAIR EXCHANGE

Conversation is sometimes one-sided. Listening to the same tale or hearing continually what Suzie and Sally continually are doing becomes “old hat.” Sometimes it would be nice to hear—“Hey, tell me about *yourself*” or “Tell me about what *you* did over the weekend.” Why don’t we listen or ask about other people and their life happenings? Do our cohorts need to hear just what we do or about us? Try listening and finding out about them instead of just telling them about you and yours.

Have you ever sent messages and in return received no response? Or, you have done special favors without a response. Intelligent people are expected to have a cadre of words from which they can select an intelligent response.

Being extremely minimal with your words during any type of conversation shows a lack of interest and (who knows) it could be seen as minimal intelligence. Who wants that reputation as a nurse?!

REMEMBER—YOU ARE NOT JUST RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT YOU VERBALLY SAY, BUT WHAT OTHERS HEAR YOU SAY AND SEE IN YOUR BEHAVIOR.

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