

The Power of Communication in Relationships

By H. Candace DeLapp, D.D.S.

"All things being equal, people choose to do business with those they like. All things not being equal, they will still choose to do business with those they like ..."

- Dr. Bill Blatchford



Dentistry has changed, or has it? I would challenge that statement that it is not only dentistry that has changed, but we

as practitioners have changed. It is no longer enough to be a good dentist, you must be a good, dare I say "great" communicator. A key foundation of any successful relationship whether it be personal or professional is communication. Building rapport between the dentist and patient is fundamental to delivering quality dental care.

So how do you build an excellent relationship? What can you do to prevent a fractured relationship when a problem arises? It all begins at the beginning. I have often heard that a good communicator spends 80% of the time listening and only 20% of the time speaking. We, as dentists, tend to want to "product dump," we all know the answer we want to give to "fix" our patients. However, by listening more than you speak, you can get into people's "why." Take time at that first meeting and at each subsequent appointment to listen and to

find out what they want and what motivates them.

"Learning to listen, that takes a lot of discipline." Gary Cole as Coach Larry Gelwix in "Forever Strong" (2008).

Keep in mind that there are a lot of dentists that practice in Colorado. The patients choose you, a tremendous compliment, so take some time to get to know them. You only have one chance to make a good first impression, so make it count.

Can you communicate with different personalities? We all have patients who you're afraid to even ask, "how are you doing" because they will chatter and share their entire life story, leaving little time for treatment. There are patients who are technical and want to know every step, read every MSRP, and be told how long, down to the minute, the procedure will take. How many of these patients have you treated? Patients are not all the same and honing your ability to communicate with all of them will serve you well.

I believe that *to be clear is to be kind*. While doing some research for this article I came across "The 7 Cs of Communication" -- clear, concise, concrete, correct, coherent, complete and courteous from the Professional Academy blog. Taking the time to set patient expectations by providing treatment plans, financial agreements and informed consents creates patient

autonomy and, more importantly, patient empowerment. With the patient as your decision-making partner, you gain their trust and will find fewer barriers to treatment, increased productivity and fewer complaints.

The 7 Cs are not just verbal. Are you in tune with your non-verbal communication? The tone of your voice, the nodding of your head in agreement or disagreement, eye rolls and sarcasm can all be signals to patients. Think about how non-verbal communication moments make others feel and the potential negative outcomes.

Do you see patients with limited English proficiency (LEP) and/or patients who are hard of hearing or deaf? What are your obligations to enable these patients to use your dental practice's services? You must take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to people with LEP and ensure that communications with individuals with disabilities are as effective as communications with individuals without disabilities provided that the accommodation does not pose a demonstrated undue burden. Wondering whether your practice is obligated to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964? Broadly speaking, if the dental practice receives any federal financial assistance, the practice is obligated to comply.

Do you know the power of saying, "I'm sorry?" Did you know that Colo-

rado is one of nine full apology states? The law protects expressions of "apology, fault, sympathy, commiseration, condolence, compassion, or a general sense of benevolence" from being used against the practitioner in a lawsuit. CRS 13-25-135:

(1) In any civil action brought by an alleged victim of an unanticipated outcome of medical care, or in any arbitration proceeding related to such civil action, any and all statements, affirmations, gestures, or conduct expressing apology, fault, sympathy, commiseration, condolence, compassion, or a general sense of benevolence which are made by a health-care provider or an employee of a health-care provider to the alleged victim, a relative of the alleged victim, or a representative of the alleged victim and which relate to the discomfort, pain, suffering, injury, or death of the alleged victim as the result of the unanticipated outcome of medical

care shall be inadmissible as evidence of an admission of liability or as evidence of an admission against interest.

You can't win an argument – when there is a complaint, there may be a tendency to feel that patients are just complaining to avoid paying for treatment. Consider a face-to-face consultation between the patient and the dentist. Let the patient have their say; there may be legitimate reasons for their discontent. The key principle of "The Secret of Socrates" is to emphasize your agreements and avoid disagreements. Your goal is to get the other person to say "yes" or agree as much as possible to gain understanding and cooperation.

By taking the time to discover your patient's concerns and address their expectations, patient satisfaction tends to increase. It's okay to say, "I'm sorry you are having difficulty, here's how we can help you." Deferring a final answer or plan at the time of this consultation

may be your best immediate course of action - you don't have to provide a solution right then. Take some time to contemplate before responding.

Your team should be well trained and knowledgeable about your practice visions and goals. Your practice stands on your reputation. You stand on the shoulders of your team. They need to be great communicators too.

In closing, don't make it about you - it's about the patient. In general, patients see you twice a year, so even if you're having a bad day, it's about the patient, not you. When they ask you how you are doing: I'm having a great day, how about you?

"It's not the customer's job to know what they want." - Steve Jobs 

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