

Improve Medical Practice Staff Communication Skills: 5 Best Practices

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Here are five best practices for selecting, managing, and supervising your medical practice staff and improving their communication skills

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Whether in person or by phone, current and prospective patients' first contact with your practice is likely through your staff. These staff members have a single opportunity to make the very best first impression possible — an impression that will reflect not only on the practice as a whole but on you, the physician they are coming to see or considering seeing.

Ensuring your staff are leveraging high-level communication skills is critical to their ability to build rapport and begin the development of long-term relationships with your patients.

We recommend the following five best practices for selecting, managing, and supervising staff.

1. Effective staff selection. The importance of the interview process should not be overlooked, nor should the manner in which you select your staff. Practice administrators and physicians may sometimes overemphasize knowledge-based interviewing — that is, simply asking concrete questions and asking candidates to self-assess strengths and opportunities versus behavioral and experiential models. In addition to these interviewing "standards," consider asking candidates to both respond to typical and unusual scenarios that might present in your practice setting as well as engaging them in patient and peer role-play interactions during the interview. Utilizing these interviewing strategies will be some of your most powerful indicators of how the candidate would actually communicate with your patients.

2. Proper use of scripting. Many practices are moving towards scripting to provide a guide for staff members and encourage standardized, consistent responses to patients that capture the information the practice needs. While scripting definitely has its place in the practice setting, it should not replace the need for communication training.

It is often difficult to script such complex situations, and these are often scenarios where the use of a script, which limits a personal connection between staff and patients, may actually frustrate the patient. You simply can't "script" an authentic connection with a patient. Make sure that your practice's use of scripting does not have the paradoxical effect of disempowering your staff's problem-solving and relationship-building skills.

We suggest scripting for simple situations, such as greeting and rooming patients. For more complex interactions, such as fielding a unusual complaint or coping with an emotionally unsteady patient, we suggest ongoing training. Such training can take the form of devoting time to group discussion and skills building during team meetings, as well as the opportunity for staff to role play such scenarios, both with each other and practice management staff.

3. Focus on delivering total communication. In our work with clients, we bring attention to the three main components of communication: content, or what you're saying; voice, or how you're saying it; and physicalization, or the use of facial expressions and body mechanics to send a host of non-verbal messages. Many staff we've worked with say they receive extensive coaching on the content of their interactions with patients but little to none on "how" they sound and look during these interactions. In fact, we've found that many never had the opportunity to receive feedback on these skills, let alone refine them.

By providing training and coaching to your staff members on all the components of effective communication — vocal inflection, volume, tone, pacing, and physicalization — you will likely see a marked improvement in their ability to effectively connect with patients.

4. Analyze telephone communication skills. Most patients — both prospective and current — will interact with staff by phone, and this is often the initial means through which they connect with your practice. Telephone communication requires certain skills that are different from face-to-face communication. To ensure effective communication through a phone, some individuals may need to speak slower or louder than they do during face-to-face interactions, while some may need to become especially aware of their tone — they might sound far more rigid or uncaring than they would be perceived in person.

We often recommend management teams take a "cold call" approach to assessing telephone communication skills. Leverage a trusted colleague to place a few calls to your clinic as a prospective patient. You'll gain valuable insight on both the content and delivery during typical telephone interactions between your staff and current and prospective patients. These insights are a great help to focusing your coaching in this area. Is their volume appropriate? Do they speak slowly enough to be comprehensible? In addition, consider whether staff sound personable and approachable by phone, and whether they provide concise, easily understandable responses to information requests.

5. Taking the right approach to training. It can be challenging to provide the level of supervision, coaching, and training to staff for the development of their communication skills. But it's important to understand that building these skills isn't just an investment in the staff; it's an investment in your patients and therefore your practice.

Devote the time and resources necessary to help your staff become more confident in and improve their communication skills. When staff interact in an effective, empathetic, and compassionate manner with your patients, they are able to build unbreakable, long-term relationships that are likely to help to generate a cascade of word-of-mouth referrals.

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