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4.3   Effective Communications

CHAPTER OUTLINE

4.3.1   EFFECTIVE PRESENTATIONS TO GROUPS

Power Corrupts. PowerPoint Corrupts Absolutely.[1]

Slide-based presentations are ubiquitous in medical education. Here are some tips for developing effective presentations to groups.

1. Presentation—Identify the subject and purpose of your presentation. Lectures that conform to Continuing Medical Education guidelines must include learning objectives and potential conflicts of interest.
2. Audience—tailor your presentation to the audience. Use language and examples that are appropriate to this group.
3. Preview/review—Tell the audience what will be coming, then present it, then summarize it for them.
4. Organization—be sure that the presentation is unified and has an introduction, body and conclusion. This is especially important if you have multiple speakers working together.
5. Handouts—Some participants will want to take notes. Others will be grateful for prepared notes that accompany the lecture.

4.3.2   EFFECTIVE ONE-ON-ONE COMMUNICATION

In business, one-on-one communication often connotes the regular meeting between a staff member and a manager. This type of meeting is valuable to help make sure that both workplace and worker issues can be raised and addressed at the same time. The meeting should be private and uninterrupted so that both parties feel comfortable expressing their views. The meeting should address the staff member's projects, obstacles and goals as well as any new information the manager needs to provide.

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1 Tufte E. Powerpoint is evil. Wired 2003;11(9).

In healthcare, one-on-one communication occurs every day between doctors, patients, nurses, clerical staff and others. These communications are rarely structured, even though it has been shown that structure leads to more concise, focused and thorough communication, especially when the responsibility for patient care is being handed off from one provider to another.

Many hospitals have adopted the SBAR method:

Situation—what is immediately wrong with the patient
Background—past medical history and other information relevant to this problem
Assessment—what the sending person thinks is wrong
Recommendation—what the receiving person should do

4.3.3   WRITING EFFECTIVELY FOR VARIOUS AUDIENCES AND GOALS

Writing is the most durable form of communication. As interns, we were reminded almost daily "If it wasn't written, it wasn't done."

Informaticists engage in writing many kinds of documents, such as

1. Journal articles and abstracts
2. Books and book chapters
3. Medical education items
4. Research grant proposals
5. Regulatory or technical specifications
6. Medical related content for health magazines, newspapers, websites or advertising

Informaticists also spend just as much time writing e-mails to the medical staff about new technologies or to vendors about how a system is going wrong.

In addition to linguistic skill, medical authors must tailor their writing to the level of their audience. The degree of technical precision required for the description of an interfacing protocol is much greater than that for, say, an article for *Cosmopolitan*. Yet both require diligence, responsible information and correct grammar.

4.3.4   DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAM TO SUPPORT SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION

An effective communications plan has several key steps.

Identify your objectives. When implementing a system there will be a myriad of communications that need to reach hundreds or even thousands of recipients. Before sending out any message, the first goal should be to figure out what purpose your communication should have. What is the outcome you are trying to achieve? Here are some examples:

■ Establish trust between the informatics team and the medical staff
■ Manage expectations so that users are not surprised or frustrated later on
■ Encourage participation in new programs, policies or procedures
■ Educate staff about features of the system.

Choose the target audience. Once the objectives are defined, it is important to spread the message to all the relevant stakeholders. Whom will this change affect? Who is required to effect this change? If the message is broadcast too widely, people will begin to ignore your transmissions. If it is too narrow, people will feel as though they are "out of the loop"

Design the messages. What are the key messages you want to communicate to each audience? Anticipate problems and provide clarification where possible. What sorts of questions do people usually ask when this kind of information is distributed? What do people need to understand in order to follow the directions? What are some of the roadblocks or hurdles that make this new method more difficult? What problem was being addressed that required this change? Finally, is there any information that should NOT be shared with the public?

Select the communication methods. In most corporate environments, email is the communication method of choice. It provides nearly instantaneous transmission to vast audiences with the opportunity for receipt confirmation and interactive dialog, all for a trivial cost. The downsides are also well known. People often disregard unsolicited emails, assuming that they are irrelevant, unimportant or even malicious. Other communication options include posters and flyers distributed around the campus; group meetings; individual meetings; and texting. Choosing the right combination of methods is key to reaching the desired audience. It is valuable to take advantage of communication methods that already exist, such as regular departmental meetings or a corporate newsletter. It is also advantageous to utilize trusted channels, such as respected clinicians or division heads.

Plan for two-way communication. Transmitting the message is only part of the challenge. Enabling feedback mechanisms encourage dialogs, which allows the team to refine strategy and gather new ideas. Listening to the recipients of the message allows the organization to adjust the system to better meet their needs. Feedback can be collected by email, anonymous suggestion boxes, communal meetings, or by making staff physically available or through a helpdesk.

Calculate the time and budget required. Sending a blast email is essentially cost-free, while the resources required to provide IT support staff to discuss the message could be overwhelming. It is also important to know how much time there is for the message to be sent and how much money should be spent to deliver it, as this will help determine the best method to get the message out.

Monitor the results. After any communication program, one should assess to see if the message was, in fact, received. Are users adapting to the new policy? Do the data support the change that was implemented? Are there still people who didn't get the memo, so to speak? Analysis of communication failures will ensure that the next communication is that much more successful.