

Interpersonal Dynamics

Its Impact on your Bottom Line

The manner in which you present yourself when dealing with others has a profound effect on your businesses. Relationships with staff have an impact on productivity; relationships with your clients directly effect billings.

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Quality. Communications. Impressions. Relationships. Delegation. Bottom Line. What do they all have in common? They constitute interpersonal dynamics. The manner in which you present yourself when dealing with others, has a profound effect on your practice's bottom line. Relationships with staff impact productivity; relationships with your clients directly impact billings.

This article focuses on the importance of interpersonal dynamics in business relationships. There is more to being a successful businessperson than just knowing the business. You must also be a good communicator. You must have strong interpersonal skills. To remain competitive in today's environment, quality service must be provided. For that to happen, an understanding of the communication process among individuals is necessary.

Everytime we send a verbal or nonverbal message to someone, communication takes place. In this process, the sender and receiver both share the responsibility for mutual understanding. That is why it is important that your nonverbal behavior matches your verbal language. Nonverbal communication designates all types of words. Some of the factors that make impressions on others are as follows: shaking hands, posture, facial expressions, appearance, tone of voice, eye contact, physical distance, listening, and self-confidence. You are communicating non-

verbally right now. What would someone see if they took a picture of you at this very moment? Would different people interpret the picture the same way? Interesting thought, because people perceive things differently. Here is an illustration of how you can send conflicting messages. A business associate asks if you have the time to speak to him. You say "yes," but throughout the entire conversation, you are looking at your watch at regular intervals. He will eventually interpret your message to be that you really don't have the time, and are not listening to what he has to say. He may then leave in frustration, and you are left wondering why he is upset. People will respond to your actions, before they will to your words. If your actions and words don't match, misunderstandings can arise and damage relationships.

When you send a message, your task is not complete until you are confident that the receiver understands it. At this stage it is very important to know the level of understanding of your audience. When you speak or write to them, you need to do it in their language—basic and understandable. When you write or speak to another in your profession, using specific terms is clearly acceptable. Do not rely on others to ask for clarification. Many people cannot ask questions easily. One, they don't know what questions to ask; two, they are afraid of appearing stupid by asking a question; or three, they may be so anxious about meeting with you, they can't concentrate.

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It is your responsibility to ensure complete understanding. How do you do this?

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Ask “open” questions to ensure understanding
- Paraphrase or restate any questions you are asked have to make sure you are answering the right question
- Suggest that the other person repeat their understanding of the conversation
- Show an example of how forms are to be completed
- Follow up in writing about what has occurred and what is to be done
- Provide reassurance and support

There are many barriers to the communication process—interruptions, lack of knowledge, time demands, noise, and physical distance, among others. You need to remove them up front to work effectively. Start with level of understanding. Always place yourself in the recipient’s position. You know what your message is, but how can you make them know it. Create a comfortable environment to reduce their anxiety, so that they will be better able to talk with you. Use “open” questions that start with “who, what, when, where, why, and how” to encourage discussion.

So far, we have focused on communications with your clients. How about your staff? They contribute to the professional image of your office. Your most important position should be the receptionist. They are the first voice on the phone, or the first person somebody meets. You only get one chance to make a good first impression. Let it start as soon as somebody calls or visits your office. Visually, does your office appear professional—neat, and free of clutter? Are you able to locate a file easily to answer questions? Does your staff greet clients courteously, help them when necessary, take accurate messages, and follow-up to make sure appointments and court appearances are met? All of these activities serve to establish a sense of professional excellence in all you do. The way in which you interact with your staff has a direct impact on their performance and attitude. Respect for each other must be the underlying theme. By encouraging their partici-

pation in office operations, you are reinforcing their importance to your firm. People need to work together, to work efficiently. To reinforce positive behavior, recognize it. “Thank you” goes a long way in improving relationships.

When working with others, delegating is an activity that should come to the forefront. But why are so many hesitant to delegate? Usually its due to fear, time, and insecurity. You may hear, “Nobody can do it better than I; they may make mistakes. I don’t have the time to train them; I can do it faster than it takes to explain how to do it. I don’t know how to ask somebody to do something for me.” None of these statements are justifiable. Let me ask, “How did you learn?” Somebody took the risk in giving you an assignment, let you make mistakes, explained how to correct it, and let you do it. It takes patience to delegate successfully. It should be viewed as a motivating tool in the development of your staff. It should also free some time for you to concentrate on important issues and clients in your practice.

Delegating should make your work easier. However, many times it is a source of frustration between two parties. Why? Poor communication, and lack of specific instructions for somebody to follow. Just as I noted that clients don’t ask questions, the same is true for people that work with you, and for similar reasons. Many studies have shown that the retention rate for listening is only twenty-five percent. Translated that means for every four instructions you give, one will be retained accurately. For delegating to be effective you should consider the following steps:

- When you can, pick the best person for the assignment
- Explain the importance of the task
- Set specific performance standards
- Clarify understanding of goals and objectives
- Provide information and resources for the job
- Obtain feedback on a regular basis
- Show support and offer guidance
- Give credit when due

You need to encourage independence; however, when you delegate, you never lose accountability. To ensure understanding, be explicit in your directions. Don’t ever assume an understanding. Make sure your associate comprehends the importance of the assignment, restates what is to be done, or writes it down. Follow-up is crucial to guarantee the proper results. Don’t wait until the due date; monitor the work periodically. It is easier to correct problems early on, than to delay until the end, when time restraints are tight. Most people want to do the right work, and do it well. You must tell them how they are performing, so they know if they should continue what they are doing or change direction. This is known as giving feedback. The worst scenario is to wait until an assignment has been totally completed, then say it is not at all what you wanted. This results in frustration, poor morale, and damages a working relationship. Successful delegation can double your own output as soon as you begin to achieve results through the efforts of others. It is worth your time on the front end to follow these steps, because your payoff will be time saved in the long run. Let me caution you about a phenomenon known as “reverse delegation.” It occurs when you have delegated a task, and an employee brings it to you with a question or a problem. You can’t answer readily, and tell them to leave it on your desk, and you will take care of it. Who now has the task? You do. To avoid this happening, a good philosophy to adopt is one that states, “Don’t bring me problems, bring me answers.” In other words, be supportive, and ask them what would they do about the problem, question, etc., but return the task to them, with the understanding that they are responsible for completing it.

Directing the work of others should be a rewarding experience. Make it happen for you by communicating clearly, encouraging questions, and giving constructive feedback.

Another word for quality is excellence. Focus on interpersonal dynamics to achieve professional excellence in your company. You will see its results in your bottom line. □