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Tips for Improving Communication in a Diverse Healthcare Environment

By Sondra Thiederman, PhD



Ethnic and racial diversity in the long-term care setting is affecting us all. Physicians, nurses, support staff, residents, and families reflect a nation in which more than 25% of the population is minority or foreign-born, almost 15% speak a language other than English in the home, and, by the year 2010, one in three will be from an ethnically diverse group.

This growing diversity has a very real impact on anyone who works in the healthcare setting. The impact includes the importance of delivering effective, long term care across cultural lines as well as managing staff which are increasingly from locales and cultures as diverse as the Philippines, Mexico, and Eastern Europe.

It may appear that delivering long-term care to diverse residents and managing diverse staff are very different challenges. In fact, the skills necessary to accomplish each effectively are very similar. Nowhere is this more true than in the area of communication. Learning to communicate across accent, language, and communication style differences can be one of the greatest challenges to administrators and care-givers alike.

You might ask why I have chosen communication as the focal point of a piece which easily could have dealt with the more complex and subtle issues of values, alternative medical beliefs, and culturally-diverse needs and expectations. The reason is that communication lies at the root of all these issues. If we can practice the simple techniques outlined below and achieve the goal of communicating in the face of stylistic and accent differences, we will then be in a position to ask the questions which will resolve the more complex issues of employee management and cross-cultural customer service.

Communication Style:

When we talk about communication style, it is impossible to generalize about all members of any culture. There are, however, certain principles that can be applied with discretion when trying to communicate across cultural lines.

Americans -- those who were raised or assimilated into the culture of the United States -- for example, tend to communicate in a straightforward style. If we do not like something, we are quick to say so. If we do not understand our bill or are confused about what is expected of us, we are -- compared to much of the rest of the world -- quick to ask questions, quick to complain, and reasonably unselfconscious about our ignorance.

With respect to many Asian immigrants, however, the situation can be very different. Asian cultures place a high value on saving face and harmony. For them to disrupt the work of a staff member with repeated questions is, in their eyes, rude and potentially destructive to the relationship. Likewise, to admit their ignorance of what is being said is a source of severe and unacceptable embarrassment. For many Asians, it is worth the price of confusion and ignorance to walk away with dignity intact.

It is clear to all of us that having residents and families who do not fully grasp what is being said can only serve to create more work for you and for your staff. The following tips will go far in helping you communicate your message effectively and, most important, assessing whether it has been understood.

- Write down -- in simple English -- what it is you are trying to explain. A written document will allow the client to consult English-speaking family or friends about its meaning without having to suffer the humiliation of admitting lack of understanding.
- If you suspect that the message has not gotten across, find an excuse to repeat yourself. You might, for example, say something like, "I'm not certain I covered everything. Let me go over this again very quickly just to make sure."
- Watch for nonverbal signs of lack of understanding. Perpetual nodding and smiling and self-conscious laughter are clues that your message has failed to get across.
- Watch for vague responses such as, "I think I understand" or "I'm sure I can figure it out." In countries as far ranging as Japan and Saudi Arabia, tentative answers like these can accurately be interpreted as, "I do not understand, but do not want to come straight out and say so."

Accents and Beyond:

More than 400 languages are spoken in the United States today. In cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, it is not unusual for upwards of 20 of these languages to be found in the workforce or resident population of a given facility. In addition, even if the individual speaks and understands English, there is a high probability that they will have a heavy accent that can interfere with effective communication. More often than not, it is the way English words are pronounced that interferes with communication, not the language itself.

You may have noticed that some immigrants seem to pronounce English with relative ease. Employees, residents, and families from Hispanic countries, in particular, are generally easy to understand once the rudiments of English are grasped. This is less true of those from Asia, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. The reason for this is that languages from these regions do not share the romance roots of English and Spanish and, therefore, have differing rules of tonality and phonics. Because of this, speakers of these languages have a greater difficulty pronouncing the sounds which make up English words.

Understanding this background does not, of course, make it any easier for the administrator to understand the dozens of different accents with which they are often confronted. What will help are the following techniques.

- Expect to understand. This is not metaphysical advice, it is the practical and proven reality that if you do not expect to understand, you will give up even before the task begins. The good news in this regard is that the more you are around accents, the easier it will become -- your ear will adjust to the assortment of sounds and tonalities.
- Create a relaxed atmosphere. Accents become heavier as tension increases. Native speakers of Tagalog -- the primary language of the Philippines -- tend, for example, to put the accent on the second syllable of multi-syllable English words. When they speak rapidly, this happens more frequently. When the pace slows, the accent improves. You have a great deal of power to create the relaxed atmosphere in which this acceleration can be avoided. One way to do this is to speak more slowly while maintaining a relaxed and even playful tone which makes it clear that you are not being judgmental of the communicator's difficulty.
- Listen to the entire message before stopping the speaker. Although you may not be understanding individual words, the meaning of the message may become clear in context.
- If the exchange involves you asking questions of the other party, phrase the question in different ways. This will allow the speaker to answer using different words and creates the possibility that those words will be more easily understood.
- Invite the speaker to write his or her message down. I recognize that this can be awkward and embarrassing for all concerned, but if done with respect it can save a great deal of confusion.

Conclusion:

Diversity is here to stay and that is good. What is not good is the number of instances in which confusion is created, residents and families not served properly, and workplace failing to develop because of poor communication. While diversity issues are complex and racism and discrimination still a tragic theme of our culture, simple efforts to bridge communication gaps can go far toward building a foundation on which these larger challenges can be addressed.

Sondra Thiederman is a speaker and author on diversity, bias-reduction, and cross-cultural issues. She is the author of *Making Diversity Work: Seven Steps for Defeating Bias in the Workplace* (Chicago: Dearborn Press, 2003) which is available at her web site or at www.Amazon.com. She can be contacted at:

Sondra Thiederman, Ph.D.
 Cross-Cultural Communications
 4585 48th Street
 San Diego, CA 92115
 Phones: 619-583-4478 / 800-858-4478
 Fax: 619-583-0304
www.Thiederman.com / STPhD@Thiederman.com

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