

# Setting up Behavioral Expectations for your Clinic

*"If you don't know where you are going, any road will do."*

Physicians and staff come into a health care setting with a variety of communication skills. On the high end, there are people who have a good sensitivity to their own communication and the impact it has on the people they are talking with. They can handle a variety of situations with relative ease. On the low end there are people who lack all sensitivity and frequently respond to communication failures by saying "that's just the way I am. If people are offended, it's because they are too sensitive."

In between is the vast middle ground...individuals who are interested and wanting to learn how to communicate more effectively and individuals who are skeptical that communicating differently will make a significant difference in the situation.

With such diversity of communication skill and attitude, how can a clinic move everyone to being effective communicators with patients and with each other? Many clinics and hospitals find tremendous benefit in clarifying expectations of behavior that everyone can agree on and support. Clarifying expectations is one of the first things I do when I come into a medical setting that has set a goal for improved communication.

## **How do I start?**

There are a variety of names that clinics and hospitals use for the concept of behavioral expectations: norms, guidelines, values, agreements, commitments. Sometimes physicians will balk at the words norms or guidelines, but will see the value in having "shared agreements". Choose the wording that best reflects your team, and what you are trying to accomplish with these expectations.

Despite the variety of word choices, there are three basic types of behavioral expectations for you to consider:

- A. Aspirations for behaviors that might never be fully realized.
- B. Reasonable expectations for behavior.
- C. Bottom-line, nonnegotiable expectations for behavior.

**Aspiration expectations** are similar to vision and mission statements. They create a vision for a team to work towards. A specialty clinic held a retreat where they spent the entire day creating and coming to consensus on how they would like to work together in the future. The list did not reflect how they were working together at the time. It was an aspiration. They reviewed the list every year at each subsequent retreat, problem-solving around areas which still needed work. At the end of five years, the team was delighted to find that the list of aspiration norms at last described how it felt to work in their department.

Here were some *aspiration* expectations from that specialty team:

We Value Treating Each Other With Respect and Consideration as Individuals

*In support of this value, we are willing to:*

- A. *Actively work to build and maintain trust*
- B. *Seek compromise or resolution when individual needs conflict*
- C. *Agree to disagree and not block the team process*
- D. *Actively support a cooperative relationship among team members*

**Reasonable expectations** are the most commonly used. Clinic teams will clarify their expectations for areas such as: conflict resolution, behavior in meetings and helping each other out in the clinic setting

Examples of *reasonable* expectations are:

- Communicate with each other with respect and consideration.
- Go directly to one another with conflicts.
- Focus on the issue, not the person.
- Take responsibility for stating what you want or need; be clear about who you want it from.
- Listen with an open mind.
- Limit side-conversations during meeting.
- Disclose when humor or anger feels disrespectful to us.

**Bottom-line expectations** might be necessary for a team where communication behaviors are creating a destructive work environment. Team members might be openly disrespectful, refuse to help each other out, are unable to handle their frustrations and stress appropriately, or disappear to places unknown during clinic time. These expectations are usually presented to the team as nonnegotiable expectations with the clear messages that failure to comply with these expectations will result in corrective action.

Examples of *bottom-line* expectations are:

- Do not leave the department without communicating about the status of patients and assignments
- Do not discuss other staff members, organizational policies, departmental issues or problems in the department while members/patients are present.
- No personal or business conversations or telephone calls will be conducted in the department during working hours.
- Acknowledge the person who is speaking and respond with a respectful answer when addressed.

## **Guidelines for Effective Use of Behavioral Expectations**

1. Behavioral expectations are easier to refer to when they are limited in number, concisely written and positive in direction.
2. Validate the list with all the team members. Get their agreement that these expectations are reasonable and have their commitment.
3. The finalized agreements should be easy to access by everyone on the team at any time.
  - posted in chart form in meeting or staff rooms
  - day-timer inserts
  - screen saver on the computer
  - stand-up tents in the worksite area
  - a signed poster
4. Refer to these expectations with regularity.
  - Compliment people for modeling effective behaviors
    - Discuss a single expectation during a team meeting and problem solve ways to improve
    - Review expectations before a challenging meeting or difficult conversation
    - Evaluate the success of a meeting or conversation according to the expectations.
5. Most importantly, hold people accountable for blatant violations of expectations or repeated inability to behave in alignment with the expectations of the team. There will be significant problems if team members (especially high status team members) are allowed to continue with complete disregard to the agreed upon expectations. Conflicts and resentment will increase, the agreed upon behavior expectations will be seen as a wasted effort, and the unintended message to the team will be "*communicating with one another effectively is something we talk about but not something we take very seriously*".

Creating behavior expectations within your team will most likely not bring about instantaneous results. They do set a target for where you are trying to go, create a common language, and provide you with a way to facilitate the challenging conversations that you have to face from time to time as a leader.