

Quality Improvement Basics: Communication Basics

Slide 1

After completing this module participants will be able to

- Identify the five standards of effective communication.
- Describe how to use a communication plan.

Slide 2 Communication

At the highest level, communication for the QI team is the process of exchanging information between individuals, departments, and within or between organizations.

More specifically, communication is a process of clearly and accurately conveying information to another person using a method that is known and recognized by all involved. It includes asking questions, seeking clarification, and acknowledging the message was received and understood.

Ensuring that you take time to communicate well within your team helps in avoiding conflict. It is, of course, better to invest your efforts in constant and clear team communication rather than having to resolve misunderstandings and possible conflicts that are frequently the outcome of not communicating with clarity and frequency.

Source: Team STEPPS:

<https://www.ahrq.gov/teamstepps/instructor/fundamentals/module3/igcommunication.html#importcomm>

Slide 3 Communication Within the QI Team

Here are some tips for effective communication within your QI team

- Invite questions and dialogue (this helps to foster an atmosphere of openness and remove judgment from ideas that are contributed)
- Meetings should not just be about reporting out but rather the creative work of finding solutions for your goals, i.e., if it could be an email, make it an email.”
- Send materials in advance so that team members can prep for meetings and discussions so that meetings can be as productive as possible.

Slide 4 Achieving a Shared Mental Model

QI goals aim at more efficient and effective ways of working to produce the best possible results and outcomes. Therefore, team members must share a common “mental model.”

The perception of, understanding, or knowledge about a situation or process that is shared among team members through communication.

Another definition that may help the shared mental model concept resonate with you is offered by the federal Health and Human Services Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) in its Team STEPPS program: A mental model is a mental picture or sketch of the relevant facts and relationships defining an event, situation, or problem. When all team members share the same mental model, this is called a “shared mental model.”

Slide 5 How Shared Mental Models Help Teams

Let's consider some reasons why the "shared mental model" is important for QI team members and how communication factors into the model:

- Keeps the team on the same page.
 - Clear communication of expectations at the outset (and maintaining those expectations throughout) ensures that team members know what to expect and when and how they will receive information and updates about the project.
- Synchronizes work and helps to foster communication in this way and ensures that team members are working at an appropriate pace to complement one another and move the project forward and helps to alleviate bottlenecks
- Articulates the goal.
 - A shared understanding of the project goals ensures that everyone on the team has a clear image of what we are jointly trying to achieve and creates a commonality of effort and purpose.
- Enables better prediction and anticipation
 - By knowing what each team member's role is on the QI project and what information will be needed to keep the team moving forward, we can anticipate what each team member will need. For example, in the patient care setting, think of a patient coming in for a cataract surgery. The patient arrives and will go through check-in, prep for surgery, surgery, recovery, and discharge. At each step, the staff anticipates what the patient and staff need for the next step. They understand the flow, what is anticipated to occur, and what will be required at each stage. Knowing each other's work, process, and desired outcomes for the process is having a shared mental model. The antithesis of this is only knowing your specific tasks or work without regard to the upstream or downstream consequences of what you do and how it impacts others. Imagine how the patient undergoing cataract surgery would experience their care without the team members having a shared mental model.

Slide 6 Standards of Effective Communication

The five standards of effective communication are a sound basis to consider how your team communicates and are good standards beyond QI work.

- Complete: Communicate all relevant information. (Does your team truly have the complete picture?)
- Clear: Convey information in a way that is plainly understood
- Brief: Concisely communicate the information (the meeting facilitator should be mindful of this standard to keep presentations brief when agendas are full)
- Timely: Offer and request information in an appropriate timeframe
- Authentic: Verify the information. Check sources and confirm the facts.

Slide 7 Right Message, Right Audience

The "right message, right audience" helps the QI team think about and communicate the problems or issues they are solving for a specific audience – what is in it for THEM. Like the elevator speech approach, you want to pare things down and only communicate what your audience truly cares about.

Another way to think of this is to ask yourself

- “Have I tailored the message, the contents, and the information I wish to convey to the particular listener or audience, knowing who they are and what they are likely interested in?”
- What would your organization’s leadership want or need to know?
- What would partners need or want to know who are carrying out parts of the process...but not part of your QI team?
- What would patients who are impacted by planned improvement need to know to be more engaged and informed about their health care because of your team’s work?

Slide 8 Communication Plan

Regular communication with all partners, those having a direct interest in or impact on the process, helps reduce uncertainty when introducing change into your organization. A communication plan is designed to engage all collaborators at the appropriate level of participation in identifying, planning, implementing, and optimizing Quality Improvement and keeping them abreast of project activities. Creating a communication plan and following it throughout your QI project helps “keep everyone in the loop” and sets expectations that partners will be informed and not caught off guard, which will increase needed buy-in and support for your QI efforts.

The communication plan ensures that the right message is delivered to the right audience by the right messenger, using the right medium, and at the right time.

At one of your initial QI meetings, have your team think through what you’d like to share about your project with your partners and broader organization (and beyond your walls as needed...your patients, for example) and document your plan with this tool be consistent and deliberate about communication and transparency for your project.

Slide 9 Sample Communication Plan

The communication plan can be a simple table, as shown here, that tracks what to communicate, to whom, by whom, how, and when. Some communications are two-way, such as meetings, phone calls, email threads, and discussions. However, many are one-way, including “FYI” emails, bulletin boards, and general information about your QI project progress. One-way communication lacks an immediate feedback mechanism, so plan ways to obtain feedback. Also, be sure to communicate using plain language and spell out or explain acronyms. Health care is loaded with acronyms, and it is best to assume your audience (especially any audience beyond your QI team) doesn’t know them all.

A final note on communication plans: While the optimal approach is to create this plan at the outset of your project, remember that it is a living document that should be modified throughout your project, as the need to communicate will likely change over time. An example of this is when you test different changes to a process that will impact or modify how work is done. You’d undoubtedly want a plan to communicate and inform process colleagues and partners about your test and how the changes will impact them.

Slide 10 In Summary

As we said earlier the five key characteristics of effective communication are to be Complete, clear, brief, timely and authentic. The main goal of using a communication plan is to ensure that the right message is delivered to the right people by the right staff using the medium and at the right time.

Thank you for taking time to learn about the “Communication basics” Module.