

Working Title - **COMMUNICATION 101, or One Person at a Time**

(Content is about “One-on-One Communication”)

Effective, pleasant communication is vital to the success of any public health effort, whether it is a nationwide public relations campaign that uses several media, or a single STD counselor screening one person at a time in a county health facility. There are only a handful of basic considerations that are essential to establish and maintain rapport with another person.

First, a word about ‘pleasant,’ as it appears in the opening sentence above: “Pleasant” is not often a characteristic we include among our goals when we communicate, in work settings especially. Yet does anyone know of truly effective communication that is not “pleasant?”

Much of the “effective” part of communicating depends on capturing and holding a person’s attention, and motivating that person to act in the interest of her own health. Because our subject matter and the content of our messages can be hard to understand, unsettling, or even alarming, it is incumbent upon those of us who deliver public health messages to communicate as simply and supportively as possible. The very best communication occurs in a positive and comfortable atmosphere of mutual receptiveness. We should aim to do everything we can to make the encounter as pleasant as possible within the circumstances in which we operate.

There are only a few imperatives in good communication. These few basic principles of good one-on-one communication apply whether the speaker’s audience is a colleague in one’s profession, an Hispanic visitor to a public health clinic in Birmingham, or a child of seven awaiting a frightening shot in a crowded, strange clinic. Because our ultimate goal is to bring about one or more healthy changes in a person’s life - most often, no small task - our work requires the most powerful tools available to us.

It is essential to acknowledge at the outset that trust, the strongest tool of all, is a living,

breathing force at the heart of every successful communication. “Right,” you say, “There’s lots of that here,” in what is too often a hectic, impersonal government building. In most of our work settings there is little or no time or practical support for a private, trust-inspiring chat. But that is the challenge, and it remains: We must do everything in our power to generate confidence in the advice and services we offer, and in our mastery of factual information and the foundation of science on which it rests. To successfully make a life-altering, long-term change, an individual must be persuaded by the information he is presented and the individual presenting it. Our information must have authority; we must present it authoritatively and persuasively. It remains in the end, though, that persuasion occurs only when trust is present.

We start to communicate our trustworthiness even before we open our mouths. In the physical setting in which we find ourselves working, in our expression and demeanor, in the details of the immediate surroundings we provide, and in our personal manner towards individuals, we communicate. As we open a conversation walking to an office with a weary, waiting-room veteran, we are communicating to everyone who watches and hears.

Because many, if not most, individuals in such a setting may have little trust in government (which most of us represent) we start with a formidable obstacle in the path of good communication, an obstacle which may be a vague but long-standing mistrust in the minds of some, or any degree of specific, concrete menace in the minds of others. This adds difficulty and urgency to our work. To overcome this obstacle, we have to acknowledge first that some degree of mistrust may exist in the outlook of the people with whom we are working. Then, as necessary, we’re called to face it and jump-start ourselves to overcome this mistrust, over and over again with different people.

To inspire trust, one must express interest and understanding. Rather than leaving our concern and ideals about public health service at home each day in the name of professional detachment, we need to bring our caring to each encounter. Genuine interest, a willingness to listen, and actively-voiced understanding can transform routine dialogue into an invaluable communication opportunity. It is not easy to offer these gifts many times a day, day in and day out. Nonetheless, only communication of this quality and consistency in trying to reach every American in behalf

of improved health can arguably make the essential “difference” in the health of the next generation of Americans.

It is always helpful to look at ourselves through the eyes of others before we can hope to reach their minds with our words. Check the external elements first. Does the space where you will meet invite communication? Is this the most comfortable seat you can provide in the most comfortable place to encourage conversation between the two of you, or do you find that your visitors often edge their chairs towards another spot? Is there a glare from a window that may land in your visitor’s eyes? Look at the space literally as your visitor would. To increase his comfort, make whatever adjustments are in your power to make.

In addition to neatness and cleanliness in your workspace, is there a human element? An open, friendly atmosphere can be created, one that engages our visitors and invites dialogue, if we allow our personalities some expression in our workspace. Does your workspace let your visitors know that you are not a piece of talking furniture? Does it reveal that you too feel the pull of a family photo or two, perhaps a plant, an attractive pen holder, a decorative clock, or interesting wall decoration? To bring common elements of personal comfort into a workspace, along with a willingness to share them with your visitors, lets visitors Intuit that you may be able to understand some of the forces and needs in their lives, however dissimilar the details may be. A comfortable meeting or work space can lead your visitor to relax, open up and share more thoughts and questions.

A construction worker has come in for follow-up examination of a work injury, and sees the picture of your three-year old on your desk. “I have a small child, Maria, too. I worry about her in day care. Her ears seem to hurt and get infected too many times.” Here is the opportunity we hope for: a chance to build the foundations of another healthy life. Briefly you are able to talk about Maria’s repeated illnesses and how to manage them and reduce their frequency, her immunization history and even her prenatal care. It is not helpful or necessary to use scientific terms such as “otitis media” at this point. These almost always confuse or obscure information rather than reveal useful knowledge.) Maria’s mother works during the daytime and has difficulty getting off work. The construction worker, who was previously hesitant to bring his

child into the clinic by himself on a day off, now feels more confident about being heard and helped in the clinic. Before leaving, he sets a date to bring Maria to the clinic to update her vaccinations, opening yet another door to good health for Maria and her family.

In preparation for such a discussion, focus your thoughts on the message you want to share with an individual. You may have had this same dialogue many times and feel in total command of the words, data, and bottom line. No matter how often we have discussed a particular health issue, it helps to focus consciously before the discussion begins even if only for 30 seconds - on exactly what we want this person to hear and to take home with him, and to act on ultimately. Simple, non-scientific language is the most easily understood by everyone. It is best to pare down the words, sentences, and time it takes to express each one. “Triage” your information, identify what is most important for you to share with a person on this occasion, and sideline the rest for another day. Know what amount of information it is realistic to share in the time that you have with an individual, and simplify your messages to accommodate that amount of time - with questions - and no more. Concentrate on what is critical to that person’s well-being at the present.

If possible, ahead of time sort your information and messages by population, so that you can reach it easily and quickly as needed. Become informed on the cultures that you encounter in your individual conversations. Know as much as you can about the individual you are about to talk with. Tailor your information and conversation accordingly, eliminating irrelevant content to streamline the discussion and make it easier for both of you to remember essentials. If there is not time, or information available in advance about an individual, have at the ready a friendly, all-purpose, health-directed opening sentence, observation, or question to begin the discussion. Look your conversation partner in the eye at the start of your meeting, and try to make regular eye contact throughout the discussion. Actively try to “connect” with this person, and to engage him actively as well. Then listen and observe respectfully.

When appropriate, repeat your understanding of what you heard your visitor express as his major concerns. Allow time for her to respond and to ask questions. Ask if he has any questions. Then draw him into a discussion of how *the two of you* can best apply the resources at

hand to her needs. From time to time as you proceed through your conversation, check his understanding of what you are saying. Without condescension, ask her to repeat your main messages, emphasizing as she speaks, why and how this is important to her health and her life, or that of her family.

Throughout, you are open, friendly, and positive in conveying your message(s.) You are direct and speak in short sentences. Above all, listen. Try to acknowledge and respond meaningfully to each issue that comes up, however briefly. Offer to talk again another day, if necessary, to cover all concerns. Reflect what you have heard in your conversation, both to check the accuracy of your understanding and to maintain the connection established between the two of you.

Effective communication is always simple, but never easy. Communicating purposefully in the way described here requires thoughtfulness, energy and commitment, and constant refueling. It is an infinitely worthy effort, and other than science, perhaps the single most important activity in public health. With the ability to share in a powerful way the benefit of our scientific knowledge, and communication that (visibly) improves the health of individual Americans. One by one, we empower the science and make useful its many possibilities.