

Effective communication a key success indicator

► IN THIS ARTICLE

- Communication failure in action.
- Planning for improved communication.
- Making the strategy sustainable.



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July marks my ninth anniversary working with Willach in Australia. Working across the company's two business divisions, I have visited hundreds of pharmacies of all shapes, sizes, brands, management models and team combinations and negotiated everything from road works in central Sydney to cow mustering in outback Queensland and unseasonal snowfalls in the highlands to reach them.

While I'm sure I now have enough frequent-flyer points to bring a small country's economy out of debt – should I wish to trade them in – I have also observed some key similarities and challenges across many of these businesses, and effective internal communication is certainly near the top of that list.

The illusion of communication

Before you start thinking that communication, or lack thereof, isn't an issue in your pharmacy, let me share a quote often attributed to playwright and political activist George Bernard Shaw: "The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

To give an example of communication failure in action, we regularly run training sessions for new clients to teach their staff about their new dispensary and workflow solutions. During these sessions, I often draw blank looks from attendees who are only vaguely aware that builders are starting work in the coming weeks, aren't too sure what that work entails and had hoped the training session would clear things up.

I find it alarming that a pharmacy would embark on a major project without informing staff of the implications and time frames. In fact, after nearly nine years, it has become relatively easy to predict the ease of change implementation based on a few probing questions to key staff, and it all comes down to communication. Just because you're thinking about an idea, an issue or a problem, it doesn't mean your staff know about it if you haven't communicated it effectively. Just because you

know all about the customer with a special order that you spent half of Tuesday investigating, it doesn't mean the staff on Sunday know about it when queried while you're not there.

While working with pharmacies on process improvements, I have talked to many staff who feel as though communication is lacking, or they are not fully included in the conversation by management who only share certain details or are generally poor communicators. Often there is a lack of cohesion between what management thinks is being communicated and what staff feel they know, which takes me back to the Shaw quote – the illusion of communication taking place.

Whether you're involved in a smaller owner-operator business or responsible for the management of a larger group, running a pharmacy business is a complex and demanding task. For many, time is the biggest enemy and communication often suffers as a result. The lack of effective internal communication strategies is rampant across all levels of pharmacy business and a significant contributor to many other problems, particularly employee disengagement and poor customer service.

What's the answer?

In the age of connectivity where there is an app for everything, it would seem the sky's the limit; however, the key is to start with a plan. While I'm sure there's even an app for this, I recommend beginning with the following simple steps:

1. Consider what needs to be communicated in the business

Try to break it down into daily, weekly and monthly communications imperatives; for example, the day-to-day messaging that needs to be passed on during shift handovers, particularly between staff with different skill levels or roles in the business. Consider what other key information the team needs to know in the long or short term and when this should be communicated.

2. Consider what you want the communication to achieve

Do you need all the team to be aware of a promotion that is coming up? Is it to improve knowledge or skills in certain area? Do you want to create opportunities for the team to bond, to feel part of the big picture and to increase their engagement? Or is it to create a sense of awareness or urgency about an important matter? Consider also how you will measure if the communication has been successful.

3. What is the best way to ensure the information reaches the audience?

It's important to consider how different

communication styles can achieve different outcomes. Meetings are best for communicating complex ideas and to increase input from staff members, face-to-face is best for making a personal connection and overcoming resistance to change, while social media can be used to build rapport and a culture of collaboration.

4. How are staff involved in the internal communication?

How do you make your staff accountable for staying on top of internal news and information? It's one thing to put a note in a communication diary and another thing entirely to ensure that it's read. It's also important to have systems in place that allow your staff to give feedback. We've all been in a staff meeting that turns into an overdue venting session with little else achieved.

5. Write it down

I know this sounds old school, but there's nothing better to make you stop and think than taking the time to jot down a plan. Work out a schedule for meetings, create an agenda template and allow staff to submit content and offer feedback. Identify how any relevant communication will be followed up, measured and then relayed to the team.

It's worth the effort

A good internal communication strategy doesn't just happen. It is an integral part of having a strong and engaged team working with you to make your business successful and requires proper time investment to ensure you have the systems and processes in place to make this strategy sustainable.

A good strategy needs to keep your staff informed by sharing what you want to achieve, why things need to be done a certain way or decisions need to be made and, ultimately, what it means for them. Don't wait for communication to become an issue before enacting change or introducing a strategy – make a start now by reviewing your current procedures to identify areas for improvement and remember to ask the experts if you need a hand.

As the former US presidential speechwriter James Humes said: "The art of communication is the language of leadership." Therefore, without an effective communication strategy within your business, how can you lead it to success? RP

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