

The Amazing Value of the Simple “Update”

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It’s only been a few hours into your workday and you’ve exchanged multiple emails with colleagues at the office and clinic; gotten responses on your voicemail from five voicemails you left late the day before to staff; and your pager is displaying a ribbon of text demanding your immediate attention from more than one pharmacy.

Before getting from your car to your office you’ve already set in motion a number of projects, agreements, or transactions. In many cases these types of communications put the “ball in another person’s court,” and you must wait for them to make their move.

You might feel quite good that you were able to communicate so many things in a short time and that you are able to go about the business of caring for patients. A day or week might go by and you start feeling some angst about the progress on these multiple projects. This unsettling feeling forms a number of questions:

1. Did the person get the message?
2. Did he or she understand the message?
3. Is this person planning to respond to the message?
4. Where is the person on the timeline of taking action on the message?
5. Did I get his or her return message?

There is a solution to both reducing the angst and increasing the effectiveness of our communications.

What everyone needs to know

Without exception, the initial and all ensuing communications between two or more individuals must have these two components—*what* and *when*!

1. “I need to know how many CEUs required for my certification before we make our professional development requests on June 1” states the *what* and the *when*.
2. “*How*” helps clarify too! “I need to know how many CEUs required..... and please email them to me by May 16 if that is possible.”

This is pretty much standard procedure....you would think. Let’s assume that this kind of clear communication exists.

The benefit of the update

Depending on the nature and seriousness of the request or task at hand elevates the importance of a sometimes-overlooked “best practice”—the update!

Updates can be simple “state of the project or request” remarks that serve many purposes:

1. Relieves stress and worry. You can probably recall seeing the look on a patient’s face just being told “We are getting the results this afternoon.” Or the relief you might have experienced being updated on the status of a loved one’s health or safety. Most of us do not do well with a state of “suspension.” We just need to “know” something...even if there is little more information than the last time. Without getting carried away here, it might be safe to say that simple updates are one of the kindest things we can do for each other especially in the medical arena.
2. Saves “time.” Have you every heard yourself say something like, “If they just would have let me know I didn’t have to keep filling out the rest of the forms, I could have saved hours!” So much valuable focus of attention is wasted by a failure to keep each other apprised of changes made in a project or simple task.
3. Reduce conflict. Stress and worry can lead to anger and conflict when individuals are kept out of the loop or not updated about changes or current status especially of those things that directly affect their sense of safety, worth, or well-being.

Updating the update

Updates are easier to do than ever before by using the same mediums that have also complicated our lives and made updates so critical—electronic communication.

1. E-Mail, of course. Short, concise, simple e-mails. “Got your request this a.m. and will get that information to you by Tuesday before lunch.” Such specificity might not always be possible, but the receiver knows you got the e-mail and you plan to do something and when they might expect a response. IMPORTANT. If things change, the update is more essential than ever. No surprises to anyone.
2. If you have any sense that the update requires the reassurance or clarification only the human voice and intonation can accomplish, use voicemail or what to talk with the person in person. Never hide behind e-mail or voicemail if the update is unpleasant or conflictual. This kind of update is almost as damaging as no update at all.
3. If the update is short and not emotion-lade, but you still want voicemail, try to catch the person when they are not there! Everyone saves a little time then.
4. Win points and respect from your patients when your staff updates then about any delays. This is almost a required courtesy these days.
5. Two regional pharmaceutical reps shared that they use a pager code to update each other on the status of a project! E.G. #12345 might mean a message from Joe Tanner that no progress yet on Project #5.” It might mean, “Got your message, will proceed.” It is a type of “electronic shorthand.”

Never underestimate the power of the update in developing a loyalty and respect from patients, staff, and colleagues. It does not matter *how* you update, but *that* you update.

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