TeamSTEPPS® 2.0

Evidence Base: Communication

At the heart of successful teams lies communication.[1] Mesmer-Magnus and DeChurch (2009) conducted a meta-analysis that synthesized 72 studies and provided additional empirical evidence indicating the importance of information sharing (i.e., communication) for effective team performance.[2] Simply defined, communication is "the exchange of information between a sender and a receiver."[1]

Effective communication is achieved through mechanisms such as information exchange protocols and closed-loop communication. Information exchange protocols are processes that structure communication systematically to facilitate presentation and recall.[3] Closed-loop communication is the process of acknowledging the receipt of information and clarifying with the sender of the communicated message that the information received is the same as the original, intended information.[4] In essence, it is the process of confirming and cross-checking information for accuracy. This style of communication fosters the ability to ensure that the entire team has shared goals, expectations, awareness, and plan execution.[5]

Unquestionably, communication is one of the key defining features of successful medical teams and quality clinical care.[6] In fact, communication is particularly invaluable within the health care context, because no single medical specialty or discipline can meet all of a patient's needs, thus, necessitating that team members communicate with one another.[7] One study stated that communication is one of the most important factors for enhancing clinical effectiveness.[8] Simply stated, "lack of communication creates situations where medical errors can occur."[9]

Leveraging the communication tools provided by TeamSTEPPS® enhances communication, as well as other fundamental team processes and states, such as team structure, leadership, situation monitoring, and mutual support. Research has demonstrated that using the communication tools and strategies provided by TeamSTEPPS has repeatedly improved both teamwork and relevant outcomes.[10] For example:

- Weaver, et al.,[11] showed an increase in use of handoffs, SBAR, call-outs, and check-backs after training, and reported enhanced outcomes within the operating room.
- Riley, et al.,[12] focused on SBAR and closed-loop communication, and showed improved perinatal outcomes and safety culture.
- Deering, et al.,[13] reported reduced rates of needle stick injuries and medication and transfusion errors, and identified the use of SBARs, call-outs, check-backs, and handoffs as contributing factors in mitigating patient safety events.

In particular, these authors attributed handoffs as being more influential than the other communication tools and strategies combined. In fact, the importance of adopting a structured handoff procedure in order to improve communication among team members during transitions in care has gained support throughout the literature.[14-18]

In sum, communication is a critical skill possessed by team members and required for effective teamwork. Team members with effective communication skills can:

- Communicate accurate and complete information in a clear and concise manner;
- Seek information from all available sources;
- Readily anticipate and share the information needs of other team members;
- Provide status updates; and
- Verify information received.

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Additional Resources

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