Communication Connection
Maximizing Relationships in a Technology-Centered World

New York Times bestselling author Joseph Grenny recently conducted an online survey in which 89 percent of those surveyed indicated that insensitive or inappropriate uses of technology - Electronic Displays of Insensitivity (EDI), were hurting their relationships by creating "digital divisiveness".[1] Others report that while technology can improve communication between physicians and patients, how it's used (for example, breaking eye contact, turning one's back to face a monitor or screen, or stopping to navigate the electronic health record or type notes) can create barriers to effective communication.

Whether its an everyday social interaction, patient-physician communication, or interaction between hospital leaders and board members, technology increasingly plays a role. Technology is an unparalleled tool for enhancing and strengthening communication, one that is rapidly changing our culture. Hospitals and health systems must be adept and innovative in leveraging the benefits technology offers across a variety of settings and for any number of purposes. But like many things, our greatest strengths and benefits can also be our Achilles heel. Technology can enhance communication, but it isn't always able to replace the connections essential to strong and effective governance leadership and can detract from or undermine relationships and leadership potential.

You Can't Always Just "Call In"
Today's health care environment with all its changes, challenges and complexity, requires boards of trustees who not only communicate, but who ensure they are engaging in the deeper dialogues that matter most. Governance conversations should be vibrant and vital, with trustees engaged in the verbal back and forth volley of constructive challenges to conventional thinking and the exploration of new alternatives. Through deep discussion, decisions are negotiated by wrestling with concepts, ideas and potential solutions. The creative energy that evolves during a hearty debate around the board table can't happen, or can't happen as easily, without the ability to read other trustees' non-verbal cues. We know the cues that signal a trustee's engagement vs. disinterest, buy-in vs. dissention, and misperception vs. understanding. These signals are essential to the effective communication necessary to conduct the critical work and leadership of the board.

Attending every meeting in-person isn't always realistic. But many of the complex issues, negotiations and decisions that trustees must address require the clarity of communication that happens best with face to face interactions. It is the job of every trustee to consider the commitment he or she made to the hospital and its leadership, and determine whether that commitment can be fulfilled by calling in via telephone or video conference to a meeting, or if it requires in-person attendance. Busy schedules and long travel times may prevent this attendance at times, but if connecting to meetings remotely is a regular occurrence for some trustees, the board may need to re-evaluate its policies and practices for in-person meeting attendance.

When Presence Takes Precedence
A key concern with email, texting and tweeting, is the opportunity for misperception and miscommunication. At the board level, the stakes are too high to allow misinterpretations and misunderstandings to happen; however, despite the value

of face-to-face interactions, time, distance, cost-savings and convenience make electronic communication an important and useful reality. The trick for trustees is discerning when face time should take precedence over technology and ensuring that technology remains a tool, not a default. Being present and taking part in face-to-face discussions may be most important in the situations outlined below.[3, 4]

Building new relationships and establishing trust. Strong working relationships and trust are especially important not only between trustees, but also with the CEO and members of the community. Being present provides opportunity to add depth to a relationship by putting names with faces, and adding knowledge of one another through the non-verbal communication that is exchanged.

Strengthening unity of purpose. Diverse opinions, ideas and perspectives among trustees is critical to avoiding "groupthink" and identifying new opportunities, but must be focused on moving the organization in the same direction. For boards of trustees, that unity of purpose should be rallied behind fulfilling the hospital or health system's mission.

The stakes are high and decisions are critical; or when issues are complex and solutions are not readily apparent. Critical conversations and dialogue are the foundation for well-informed and innovative solutions. Without constructive challenges to conventional wisdom and give-and-take debate, the best solutions may never surface.

Issues are sensitive and the potential for conflict is high; or when conflict resolution is needed. When handled with respect and purposeful dialogue, short-term tension and disagreements can be constructive opportunities to building stronger understanding and appreciation for the disparate views among board members.

Seeking the engagement and views of others; or when seeking commitment, priority or sense of urgency from others. Miscommunication and misjudgment are often the result of inadequate listening, which can happen easily when separated by technology. To ensure strong, effective communication and connection, trustees should listen attentively without distraction or rushing to judgment to absorb information and acquire new ideas.

Persuasion and negotiation are required. The board's success is highly dependent on how trustees interact with each other, with the CEO and with members of the community. The ability to influence outcomes is highly dependent on the ability to connect personally with others, to understand their perspectives and to respond effectively.

Technology Mishaps That Don't Occur When Face-to-Face

- The video connection is lost and must be re-connected

- The telephone is muted but the speaker doesn't know it

- The connection is so poor that the in-meeting participants cannot understand what the teleconferenced trustee is saying

- Telephone or web-conferenced trustees speak up but no one notices over the in-person meeting noise

- Last-minute materials are printed and not emailed to connecting participants

- The connected trustee simultaneously checks his or her email, makes a sandwich, or multi-tasks in some other way that detracts the meeting from their primary attention

- Breaks and meals facilitate relationships and side conversations, while remotely connected trustees remain isolated and separated from critical conversations

Confidentiality is critical. Board members are in a position of trust, and in recognition of the sensitivity of the information entrusted to them, have a fiduciary responsibility to keep certain information secure and confidential.

Organizational performance is lagging and motivation, inspiration and leadership must be evident. Hospital boards must value creativity and innovation, and leverage change for strategic advantage. They must lead an organization that can capitalize on the new opportunities emerging from the rapid change occurring in health care today. Leadership that inspires and motivates others to succeed is driven by an authentic message that connects the organization in a personal way to a compelling vision and mission.

The issue, event, organization or purpose is important. Showing up and being present is a demonstration that a person or persons, event, organization or purpose is important to the trustee and worthy of investing personal time to support.

Ensuring Clear E-Communication

In her article, "Is Social Media Sabotaging Real Communication," Susan Tardanico offers tips for ensuring messages and issues are well-communicated.[2] Steps trustees should take to ensure their e-communication is not working against them include:

- Short-circuiting email exchanges that seem to lead to conflict by calling or talking in person;

- Double checking out-going communications for possible misinterpretation;

- Recognizing that different generations have different communication preferences—older generations typically prefer to speak over the phone or in person, while younger generations generally prefer text or email messages;

- Not hiding behind technology. Technology makes it easy to avoid difficult people, conflicts and other challenging situations, but true leadership requires engagement;

- Doing what you say, ensuring actions are consistent with written communications; and

- Circling back to make sure the message was received and correctly understood.

It's the job of the board to set the tone for the rest of the organization. Interacting with other board members in person helps foster not only a better knowledge and understanding of other trustees and their viewpoints, but can fuel a stronger unity of purpose and synergy among board members, and lay a foundation of trust within the board. By their presence and engagement, board members demonstrate the importance of the hospital's mission and its commitment to the organization and the community. Through its presence, the board has the opportunity to lead and inspire others.

Sources and Additional Information

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