

# THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN HOSPITAL MANAGEMENT

NZE, Chinwe H.

Doctoral student, Imo State University Owerri  
Email: [chinwey2k2@yahoo.com](mailto:chinwey2k2@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

*This paper exposes the role of effective communication in hospital management. The hospital is seen as a home of hospitality which houses several professionals, skilled and unskilled workers who render various services all geared towards providing qualitative medical care. Effective communication here is seen as a vital management tool which ensures smooth running and good coordination of all hospital activities. The study further reveals the forms of communication in hospitals and the benefits of effective communication as regards patient-staff relationships, medical diagnosis, feedback, free communication, hospital goals, legal benefits, healthy practices etc. The study also highlights the barriers to effective communication as well as the results of ineffective communication in hospitals. The study recommended the ways of ensuring that communication barriers are removed and suggests ways of improving the understanding of messages transmitted throughout the hospital by staff, patients and visitors for effective communication geared towards achieving hospital goals.*

**Keywords:** Effective Communication, Hospital, Management and Hospital Management

## Introduction

The hospital is an establishment made up of different professionals primarily set up to provide health care services to patients. Professionals found in the hospitals include Doctors who specialize on different fields of Medicine, Nurses, Physiotherapists, Pharmacists, Lab Scientists, Technicians, Engineers, Dentists, Dieticians, Hospital Administrators, and Health Record Officers etc. A recent survey identified about 300 recognized staff categories which exist in hospitals (Fernandez: 2009). These staff categories must work together to achieve the aims and objectives of the hospital. For this collaboration to be possible there must be effective communication between the departments and different staff of the hospital who work as a team.

In spite of the various communication gadgets being used in the society today, professionals in the hospital need to communicate with one another in the course of their duty as duties are shared according to their professional training. A hospital researcher Metzger in 1975 observed **that** the hospital has a rare mix of diverse skills and talents (Fernandez: 2009). **The hospital** is seen as the most complex and diversified groupings **of** employees in an industry. These groupings must work in harmony through effective communication in delivering healthcare.

The hospital is made up of skilled and semi skilled workers who play different roles and interact at different levels. The various departments that make up the hospital, therefore, cannot be properly managed without adequate and effective communication.

### **The Concept of Management: An Overview**

The practice of management is as old as time. From the biblical aspect, the book of Genesis reveals that after man was created, God gave man the responsibility of taking charge of other creations. Management is practiced and applied in all fields including: business, academic-institutions, media houses, religious bodies, hospitals, government etc. According to Trewatha and Newport (1982) management is the process of planning, organizing, actuating and controlling an organization operations in order to achieve a coordination of the human and material resources essential in the effective and efficient attainment of objectives. These activities make up the function of management. According to Trewatha and Newport, application management functions must be considered within the confines of a given organizational setting. Similarly, Nwachukwu (2007) defined management as "getting things done through and with others". This aptly reveals what transpires in the hospital where no health worker is independent of the other. Working in a hospital setting is a collaborative effort.

Griffin (1984) sees management as a process of planning, organization, leading and controlling an organization's human, financial, physical and information resources to achieve organizational goals in an efficient and effective manner. This definition reveals that communication is very important ingredient of management.

### **Functions of Management**

Over the years, management scholars like Henri Fayol, Fredrick Taylor, Elton Mayo etc. have identified functions of management as follows:

**Planning:** Planning is the mental and intellectual work required before physical effort takes place which allows a manager to bring together resources effectively in accomplishing organizational objectives (Trewatha and Newport: 1982). Planning is the foundation of the success of the management of an organization. Planning

involves setting goals and searching for the best ways of achieving them. Planning gives rise to the mission statement of an organization which reveals the unique purpose and scope of operations which distinguishes the organization from other of its types (Fernandez: 2009). The planning function of management sets target for the organization and leads to selection of action plan.

**Organizing:** Trewatha and Newport (1982) opines that organizing combines various human and material resources into a meaningful whole. According to them, it can be accomplished by dividing the work to be done into specialties, grouping similar activities (departmentalizing), identifying desired authority relationships between individuals and groups, delegating authority and considering the social and economic consequences associated with various organizational forms. These activities result to informal relationships which influence behaviour within an organization. *Organizing* an establishment leads to work specification, job design, departmentalization, authority, responsibility and accountability.

**Leading (Actuating):** Management here assigns people with the right is into the right positions in order to achieve organizational goals. Leading involves motivating and training staff, dealing with groups and processes, communicating with individuals and departments etc. It involves initiating and directing work in the organization. It is the most challenging part of management.

**Controlling:** In the process of actualizing its objectives, management must monitor and evaluate the activities of the organization. This is a management function billed to check whether the organizations activities tally with organizational goals. It brings about efficiency and effectiveness in organizations as well as enhanced performance and productivity. Organizational goals range from service to customers, social responsibility, profitability, survival, growth, innovation to welfare of employees.

### **The Hospital Setting**

The hospital exhibits hospitality where people of various ages with different health challenges are warmly received and cared for. The hospital is made up of several departments which work together to achieve organizational goals, chief among them is offering medical services to patients and providing medical care.

A typical hospital comprises of two main divisions, the Administrative Division and the Clinical division. Generally, some departments which exist in the hospital include the Out Patient Department, the Administrative Department, the Accounts, Surgery, Orthopedics, Obstetrics and Gynecology, Anesthetic, Paediatrics, ENT, physiotherapy, Nursing Services, Histopathology, Clinical Chemistry and Haematology. Others include the Dental, Nutrition and Dietetics, Works department, Accident and Emergency, Internal Medicine, Family Medicine, Medical Records

etc. All these departments work hand in hand for the smooth running of clinics and the hospital in general. Communication is the only means of reaching out to various departments in the course of daily running of the hospital as each Department depends on another for survival.

### **Managerial Skills**

Managers at all levels in the hospital require special skills for effective management. These skills include technical skills, interpersonal skills, conceptual skills, analytic skills and diagnostic skills.

**Technical Skills:** Managers need special skills needed to accomplish specialized tasks. These skills are necessary for effective task performances. They are skills acquired through formal education from recognized institution of higher learning. Such skills produce Doctors, Nurses, Engineers, Accountants or Administrators.

**Inter Personal Skills:** In hospitals, there exists a high level of interaction between workers. The managers should communicate effectively with superior officers, subordinate officers and colleagues. Managers should be able to motivate and understand their colleagues. Managers must possess very good interpersonal skills to succeed.

**Conceptual Skills:** Managers in the hospital must be mentally sound and creative. Managers need the mental capacity to understand various relationships in the organization and to have a Holistic view of all parts of the hospital.

**Analytic Skills:** Hospital managers should be able to monitor all parts of the hospital and prioritize actions. They should be able to take decisions promptly especially in emergency situations.

**Diagnostic Skills:** In hospitals, a lot of diagnosis is made. Health workers especially those in the clinical areas must be well grounded in their fields to be able to make correct diagnosis and take prompt decisions based on the diagnosis made to save emergencies especially where patients are concerned. Also managers can diagnose problems peculiar to some units and make suggestions on how to reinvigorate such units for optimum performances.

### **Communication and Hospital Management**

Communication is a vital part of the functioning of a hospital. Communication in the hospital may be internal or external. It is interaction between the internal and external publics of the hospital. Communication between the internal publics of the hospital includes interaction among workers from different departments in the hospital while, communication among the external publics of the hospital involves

communication between the staff of the hospital and visitors or patients in the hospital.

The essence of communication in any organization is to provide employees with necessary information to do their jobs and to develop attitudes that promote coordination, performance and job satisfaction (Trewatha and Newport: 1982).

The key element responsible for establishing hospitals is the patients. Every activity that takes place in the hospital revolves around the patients. Conscious patients at the time of entry into the hospital are confused, in pain, depressed or anxious. In this state of mind, they must be understood and their needs attended to. For this understanding to workout, the language of the patient must be interpreted and the patients must receive a satisfying feedback.

Communication involves encoding of meaningful symbols in form of writing, speech or body language to a receiver who decodes the symbols and sends a feedback. For there to be effective communication in the hospital, medical workers must relay meaningful symbols to fellow staff management and patients to avoid incidents of wrong prescription, wrong diagnosis, wrong treatment that could lead to death etc. This is because the business of medical and health workers is the business of saving lives.

Effective communication is a two-way process where the receiver must decode the full meaning of the message. The sender must encode the messages meaningfully and the receiver must fully understand the message. This is very important in drug prescription and administration to avoid wrong prescriptions, overdose or under dose. This is also very important in carrying out deliveries and medical or surgical producers.

### **Forms of Communication in Hospital**

1. **One-to-one Communication:** This is a direct form of communication where the speaker meets with the receiver one-to-one. Decker in Fernandez (2009) pointed out nine behavioural skills which emanate from one-to-one communication as follows:
  - Eye Communication
  - Posture and movement
  - Gestures and facial expressions
  - Listener involvement
  - Dress and appearance
  - Using humour
  - Voice and voice variety
  - Language, pause and non word



- The natural self (Self confidence)

These skills send a signal about the sender of the message and the receiver and play their own roles in the communication process. Medical and health workers must dress well and must be good listeners to colleagues, their patients and their relations.

1. **In patient** - staff communication, useful information are deduced from patients when the right communication skills are employed and patients receive useful tips from care givers such as information on preventive measures. Patients through this medium can as well make useful suggestions on ways of improving medical service based on their hospital experiences.
2. **Telephones:** Telephones are very important communication tools in the hospital. Instructions can be quickly passed on to hospital personnel especially in emergencies with the telephone, intercommunications and mobile phones. The stores unit can be quickly contacted for hospital disposables or other materials to be quickly delivered at the point needed. Telephones placed at bedsides can be used by patients or their relatives to summon medical personnel in case of new developments. Telephones/intercommunication in hospitals should therefore be functional.
3. **Hospital Suggestion Boxes:** Suggestion boxes should be kept at strategic places in the hospital in order to receive suggestions or complaints from visitors to the hospital. Such suggestions when applied by management could help the hospital achieve its aims and objectives or point out new frontiers that can improve patient care or medical service.
4. **Sign Posts:** There are indispensable communication tools in hospital. They direct visitors and patients to where they should go and make their stay in the hospital stress free.
5. **Staff Training:** This provides orientation and re-orientation for staff of the hospital through trainings; staff members update their knowledge and learn new job experiences from their colleagues. It imparts the professionals with the knowledge of new ways of doing things in their profession. It also teaches the staff on safety tips and working successfully without litigations.
6. **Regular Staff Meeting:** This provides a forum for management to receive direct feedback from staff periodically and vice versa on issues affecting the hospital.
7. **Communication with the Public:** Countless visitors visit hospitals on daily basis. Some accompany relations, some as patients, some as researchers,

and some as companies who are directly or indirectly linked to hospital services. The external publics also include the host community. The public relations department of the hospital is saddled with the responsibility of creating a good hospital image in the eyes of the external publics through ensuring that a good rapport is established between the hospital and the external publics, making the hospital a warm and friendly environment for visitors.

8. **Formal Communication System:** Formal communication system refers to official channels of communication or transmitting information within a hospital environment. Some formal communication methods used include reports, minutes, meetings, memos, file notes etc. These all have their various formats tones and languages which must be used correctly to make meaning. Formal communication system has different flows. They include downward, upward, lateral or outside flow. In the downward flow, instructions move from the management to the subordinate/lowest-rank of staff in form of policies, procedures, requests for information etc. (Trewatha and Newport: 1982). In the hospital downward communication comes from the Medical Director and the top management committee to other hospital staff. Upward communication makes room for staff to provide information to their supervisors. It works in establishments where there is open door policy. This communication makes for flow of information among individuals of the same level in an organization. It helps in coordinating the activities of various units and departments that exist in a hospital. In the outside flow, colleagues of the same department may attempt to get information from another department or cadre. This is common in hospitals as departments often seek information from other departments in health care delivery.

A combination of all the flows make for an inhibited flow of information which will culminated in achieving hospital goals.

### **Benefits of Effective Communication**

1. **Patient-Staff Relationship:** Effective communication plays a vital role in modeling a very good rapport between the patients and staff or care givers. The patient who is usually anxious will be calmed down by medical personnel who listen actively and show empathy to the patient. A happy patient recovers quickly. Effective communication makes for a relaxed atmosphere which will enable the patient open up to the doctor, nurse, counselor etc and release useful facts which will enable the care giver take decisions or make useful choices necessary to alleviate the suffering of the patient whose confidence in the care givers increases or is sustained.

2. **Correct Diagnosis:** Effective communication or exchange of information facilitates fast and correct diagnosis of diseases. This will help the doctor to make the right prescription to patients through the pharmacy department. Right diagnosis/prescription prolongs the life of patients while the reverse could lead to death.
3. **Removal of Communication Barriers:** Communication is a very vital tool in managing a hospital. Effective communication makes for the removal of communication barriers. Through effective communication, the medical director and top management committee are informed about successful medical procedures recorded in the hospital as well as failures. Daily reports about incidents in the hospital will enable the management take decisions on issues affecting the hospital. It will also bring subordinate staff closer to management to freely discuss official and even personal matters affecting staff. There is free flow of information and communication gap is reduced<sup>1</sup> to the barest minimum as a way of moving the hospital forward.
4. **Providing Feedback:** Effective communication provides a feedback mechanism for both patients, their relations and even for staff members. Hospitals who strive to keep monitoring patients who have been discharged from the hospital provide useful information for management. This determines the success level of the hospital management. Again effective communication ensures management hears staff reaction to instruction given and management also receives useful information from staff which can be used to reposition the hospital.
5. **Reduction or Avoidance of Litigation:** Effective communication ensures that the hospital community also thinks the right way to avoid legal battles which emanate from ignorance or mistakes which could have been avoided arising from misinformation or disinformation. While dealing with patients, health workers should use the most effective means of obtaining information from patients and their relatives. They should also keep to instructions or find out from their superiors facts when they are in doubt to avoid making mistakes which can kill a patient or cause permanent injuries to patients.
6. **Understanding Organizational Goals:** Effective communication makes both management and staff of the hospital has a good understanding of organizational goals of the hospital such goals cannot be achieved when staff and even the management team are ignorant of the goals. Constant training, meetings and forum with all stake holders will remind the staff or fine tune them to the objectives. Only when the objectives are known can results be achieved.



7. **Freedom of Expression:** Effective communication makes for freedom of expression. When individuals air their views, good ideas may be drawn from them to improve services that are provided or to introduce new ideas or proffered ways of improving the already existing services. This will certainly improve the quality of services provided by the hospital. Freedom of expression will also give patients and staff the liberty to relay their grievances which would be tackled for an improved patient-staff, staff to staff or staff- management relationship.
8. **Team Work:** Team work recognizes all staff as important agents who work together to achieve goals of the organization. Team work gives every staff a sense of belonging. It promotes identity of the staff and enhances commitment to keep serving the organization. Team work encourages open communication and staff gets to know themselves in a closer and somewhat intimate way. Team work leads to sharing of problems and challenges as tasks are performed.
9. **Provision of Information:** In the hospital, new cases which are sometimes rare emerge. Through regular or periodic meetings like clinical conferences, such rare cases are discussed and other health workers are enlightened or exposed to the occurrence. Again the outbreak of diseases and epidemics can be communicated to health professionals to enable them take adequate precautions.
10. **Healthy Practices:** Free flow of information and feedback makes for healthy practices. Staff and patients can freely inquire from the right source, answers to issues bearing on healthy practices either in the hospital or outside. These answers that can assist individuals and groups in choosing healthy options that will prolong their lives.
11. **Improving Organizational Image:** Effective communication helps building a good corporate image and identity for the organization. A hospital which relays to the public issues concerning the hospital and the health of the citizens endears the hospital to people. Enquiring about the state of health of discharged patients as well as offering services to ruralites at their door step also builds a healthy relationship between a hospital and its publics. While striving to make profit, hospitals that provide occasional free health services by throwing open their doors to all and sundry who need medical care also improves the image of the hospital. All these can be achieved through effective communication.
12. **Hospital Development and Staff Welfare:** Through effective

communication, the hospital management receives useful information required to take decisions that will lead, to the growth and development of the hospital. Suggestions or ideas can lead to innovations that will attract more customers (patients especially) to the hospital. In terms of welfare, open communication generate projects that can better the lives of the staff who toil daily to run the hospital. This will increase workers satisfaction and encourage them to work harder for the organization.

### **Barriers to Effective Communication**

- **Poor Listening:** People spend much time in communication, however many people are poor listeners. Poor listenership could lead to administrative lapses, poor diagnosis and even death. Good listenership is a very useful skill needed by hospital workers to perform their duties effectively.
- **Friction among Units and Departments:** The hospital is made up of several units/departments all performing specialized functions. Unhealthy working relationships among colleagues could bring friction among departments which will either slow down the rate of work or lead to a total breakdown of the system.
- **Distorted Messages:** Messages can be distorted by a number of reasons ranging from the communication channels like telephone, written materials, wrong interpretation or organizational levels. Another reason for distortion is noise from different sources. These have serious implications in hospitals and so staff should make extra efforts to preserve received messages as originally encoded.
- **Bias and Selectivity:** Bias and selectivity occurs when individuals or groups in an organization hear, read or see only what they are interested in shielding oneself from certain communication prevents the person from acquiring all round information. Again the management of some organizations sometimes filters information which subordinates may accept. By this act, communication is screened as vital information sometimes is withheld.
- **Frame of Reference and Semantics:** When information is sent out as symbols, messages are misunderstood or misinterpreted. Words sometimes are used in relation to unfamiliar circumstances known to the receiver and symbols means different things to different people. These hinder effective communication especially in the hospital.
- **Fear:** Hospital workers get emotional especially when serious health

challenges to patients are discovered. The fear of how the patient or his relations would take the news sometimes arises. Such news/information are often mismanaged and the impact of such communication is lost.

- **Information Overload:** Hospitals especially General hospitals, Teaching hospitals or Federal Medical Centres are usually a beehive of activities. Clinical staffs are often overloaded with reports and results, whereas the Admin Department is overloaded with memos, reports telephone messages etc. This overload of information must be properly handled to avoid a mix up of issues, reports and other data.
- **Inadequate Knowledge:** Inexperience or poor knowledge of subject area as well as lack of concentration can lead to wrong diagnosis which usually has a chain reaction. For instance when a doctor makes a wrong diagnosis, he sends a patient to do a wrong lab test. The Lab Scientist carries out the test and the result is sent back to the doctor who sends the prescription to the pharmacist who in turn dispenses the wrong drugs to the patient. Through this action, death is imminent.

#### **Barriers to Effective Communication**

According to Fernandez (2009), the following are barriers to effective communication:

- a. Inadequate machinery for communication
- b. Faulty presentation
- c. Deception (due to misinformation)
- d. Interference (like noise, heat, poor light etc.)
- e. Lack of channels (providing an enabling contact between people who need information and people who have it).
- f. Distortion (due to length of time required for messages passed to get to its destination)

#### **Results of Ineffective Communication in Hospitals**

When communication is not carried out effectively due to the already discussed barriers or others reasons, the following results:

- Death of patients
- Disabilities or certain impairments are suffered by patients as a result of wrong therapies or wrong drugs.
- Legal suites are filed by patients or aggrieved patients relations
- Loss of practicing license of medical personnel
- Bad image or reputation for the hospital arises
- Loss of patients/patronage
- Resultant closure of the centre or hospital

### **Management Information System (MIS)**

Modern hospitals make for serious interaction between machines (hospital Equipment) and people. The two elements, people and machines work together to provide information flow. In Griffin (1984), MIS is seen as a system designed to provide information to managers. According to Griffin, MIS entails an integrated data base (usually in computer), a hierarchical information structure, and an orientation toward decision support. According to Griffin, the purpose of MIS is to provide managers with information they need to make informed decisions. Similarly, Trewatha and Newport (1982) said management information systems refer to people and equipment used in the selection, storing, processing and retrieving of information required in management decision - making process.

Since MIS makes for flow of information, it makes for easy access to information and its understanding. This MIS leads to effective communication especially in hospitals where people and equipment/machines are very important. Information systems must be excellently managed in hospitals as more often than not, critical or crucial decision are taken, sometimes on the spur of the moment in a bid to save lives.

### **The Way Forward**

In Trewatha and Newport (1982) overcoming or preventing communication barriers requires that all organizational members commit themselves to improved communication effectiveness. This commitment they said must include efforts to improve the understanding of messages transmitted between senders and receiver throughout an organization.

According to them:

- The intent of each message must be clearly defined.
- In order to encode and transmit messages satisfactorily, the sender must determine whether information is to inform, to stimulate thought or to persuade others.
- The basic message must be appropriately formulated so that receivers are able to respond in the desired manner.
- For the benefit of both sender and receiver, the verification of communication is also important in reducing errors.
- Written communication should be used whenever practical. Policies, procedures, rule, orders and instructions often have a much better chance of being understood when they are in writing.

Trewatha and Newport (1982) also declared that managers must recognize the behavioral considerations in order to reduce misunderstandings while improving credibility and trust. According to them managers should listen with sensitivity, discuss problem with subordinates and fit messages to the needs of the receivers.

In hospital, doctors as well as other health workers should listen with keen interest to patient and their relations. Patients are more often than not depressed, in pain or uncomfortable. Health workers must be sensitive to the plight and need of patients as this is part of their healing process. Health workers should also discuss health issue with their colleagues for a clearer perception of diagnosis and treatment. Discussing challenges with subordinates draw subordinates to their superiors and make them at ease with them. Messages in the hospital should not be codified in languages or expressions that cannot be understood". Messages like folder notes, diagnosis or lab results should be clearly written and passed for accurate and precise interpretation.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the method/process of communication in patient service delivery has been a big challenge to medical practitioners and other health workers in currently. Communication has been seen as the bedrock of all activities in the hospital starting from the hospital gate to the reception point, the doctor's office, the laboratory, the pharmacy etc. The hospital has numerous segments, departments and professionals and each of these interact per minute round the clock for the smooth running of the hospital and to achieve the purpose for which it was set up. This can only be achieved through effective communication. Communication provides information to both staff and patients of the hospital for management of health conditions.

Different modes of communication exist in the hospital. These modes must be properly managed for effective communication to be achieved in the hospital. Effective communication offers many benefits to management, staff, patients and other visitors. It enhances good patient-staff relationship, leads to correct diagnosis, provides feedbacks and reduces litigation. It also makes for organizational understanding, encourages team work and freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, there are some barriers to effective communication. These include insensitive listening, distortion, bias, semantics, lack of knowledge among others leading to serious issues like disabilities and even loss of lives. All hospital workers from the management to the unskilled workers must therefore endeavour to improve their communication skills to build good working relationships with their colleagues, patients and patients relations as well as other visitors in the hospital in order to achieve the aims and objectives of the hospital and further commit themselves seriously to the business of saving lives



### References

- Comerford, R. & Collaghan, D. (1985). *Strategic management, text, tools and cases for business policy*. California: Kent Publishing Company
- Fernandez, S.O. (2001). *Communication: A model for information management in psychiatric hospitals*. Yaba News, October/December 2001.
- Fernandez, S.O. (2009). Lecture on Effective Communications in the Hospital.
- Griffin, R.W. (1984). *Management*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Lloyd, M. B. (1996). *Basic Communication Skills in Medicine*. London: Churchill Livingstone
- Nwachukwu C.C. (2007). Management theory and practice. Africana: First Publishers Limited, Owerri, Nigeria.
- Thompson & Strickland (1984). *Strategic management concepts and cases*. Texas: Business Publication's.
- Trewatha, R. & Newport, G. (1982). Management. Texas: Business Publications, INC,