American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education **2003; 67 (4) Article 112.**

STATEMENTS

Using Supportive Communication to Foster the Department Head/Junior Faculty Relationship

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The quality of the department head/junior faculty relationship is critical to, not only the professional development success of the faculty member and the intrinsic satisfaction of the department head but to the likelihood of the faculty member staying at the institution. A previous study on pharmacy junior faculty satisfaction reported that, in general, junior faculty members are somewhat ambivalent about career satisfaction based on the roles of teaching, scholarship, and service. This paper advocates the incorporation of supportive communication principles into a regularly scheduled personal management interview program between department heads and their junior faculty members. A detailed discussion of how department heads might implement a personal management interview program that incorporates eight principles of supportive communication is provided.

Keywords: Personal management interview, supportive communication, junior faculty members, department heads, Professional development

INTRODUCTION

Surveys consistently reveal that the ability to effectively communicate face-to-face with subordinates is the most critical factor in retaining employees and receiving promotions.[1-4] One critical relationship in schools of pharmacy that requires effective communication is the relationship between a department chair and his or her junior faculty members. Simply stated, if junior faculty members are satisfied with the quality of academic life at their institutions they will be less likely to leave. Satisfaction with the quality of academic life is especially important in retaining junior faculty members because of the increased opportunities for pharmacy faculty; both in academia and elsewhere. Since many department chairs have not had formal training in managing employees the purpose of this paper is to discuss how department heads might incorporate eight principles of supportive communication into a regularly scheduled personal management interview with their junior faculty colleagues.

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THE PERSONAL MANAGEMENT INTERVIEW

A key difference between effective and ineffective department head performance is the extent to which they communicate to their junior faculty expectations in the areas of teaching, scholarship, and service. A recent investigation of junior faculty satisfaction reported that junior faculty were especially unclear concerning school expectations regarding scholarship and "what is really rewarded around here."[5] With opportunities to receive feedback on a regular basis, junior faculty members may become more focused on maximizing their professional development opportunities than if they do not receive regular feedback from their department heads. Because of tremendous time demands, providing opportunities for feedback with junior faculty is difficult for many department heads. One way to ensure time on a regular basis for providing junior faculty with professional development and feedback opportunities is to implement a personal management interview program.[4,6]

A personal management interview program is a regularly scheduled (eg, monthly) one-on-one meeting between a department head and faculty member. One study of health care organizations showed that subordinate effectiveness, as defined by organizational performance, employee performance, employee satisfaction, and re-

Table 1. Steps in a Personal Management Interview Program*

Steps
• The interview is regular and private. • The major intent of the meeting is continuous improvement in professional development, so the meeting is action-oriented. • Both the department head and the faculty member prepare agenda items for the meeting. It is a meeting for improving both of them and not just the department head's appraisal of the faculty member. • Sufficient time is allowed for the meeting. Usually 30 minutes to one hour. • Supportive communication is used so that joint problem solving and continuous improvement result. • The first agenda item is a follow-up on the action items generated by the previous meeting. • Major agenda items for the meeting might include: o Performance goals o Information sharing o Interpersonal issues o Time-management problems o Individual needs o Personal concerns or problems o Feedback on job performance • Praise and courage are intermingled with problem solving. A review of action items generated by the meeting occurs at the end of the interview.

*Modified from Whetton and Cameron, p. 239 (see reference 4).

duced personal stress, increased significantly when managers conducted bi-weekly or monthly meetings with their employees.[6]

How can department heads institute a personal management interview program with their junior faculty members? It can be done in two steps. The first step involves a role-negotiation session in which faculty expectations, responsibilities, standards of evaluation and other issues are discussed and clarified to the faculty member's satisfaction. As stated previously, one of the problems reported in the pharmacy literature regarding junior faculty is that many do not have a clear idea of exactly what is expected of them or on what basis they will be evaluated.[5] For example, scholarship requirements and the time parameters for promotion and tenure should be explained in specific, unambiguous terms. Likewise, teaching evaluation should be explained. For example, how important are student evaluations in the promotion process? Does the institution employ a peer evaluation system of teaching? If so, is it formative or summative? How important is using innovative methods of teaching or reengineering a course in performance evaluations? What is **really** rewarded at this institution? In addition, service expectations should be discussed.

The second and most important step in the personal management interview program is a regularly scheduled and ongoing meeting between the department head and the faculty member. The operative word here is "regularly scheduled" as opposed to "when a mistake is made" or "when a crisis arises." These meetings allow for the free exchange of communication. It allows the department head to coach or counsel the faculty member. The meeting should last 30 minutes to an hour and should focus on such items as organizational problems, information sharing, interpersonal issues, obstacles to improvement, training, individual needs, feedback on job performance, and any personal concerns. This is not a meeting to be holding a meeting. It should lead to action before the next meeting. Both parties should prepare for the meeting and bring items to discuss. It is not a formal appraisal meeting. Rather, it is a professional development and improvement session in which both the department head and faculty member have a stake. By allowing faculty members to have personal time with the department head, formal, long, inefficient departmental meetings may be kept to a minimum. Boss's research indicated that the personal management interview program actually increased discretionary time for managers because it reduced interruptions and unscheduled meetings.[6] Before each subsequent meeting, action items should be reviewed and discussed. Thus, continuous improvement is encouraged. Table 1 summarizes the personal management interview components.

In order to maximize the utility of the personal management interview program it is imperative that department heads have a working knowledge of and practice supportive communication. The next section discusses this.

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION

Skillful communication is important for department heads because they are responsible for assessing junior faculty performance. Supportive communication is interpersonal communication that has the goal of preserving the relationship between the department head and faculty member, while still addressing the problem at hand.[4] Supportive communication is imperative for an effective personal management interview program. The following eight basic attributes of supportive communication can be incorporated into a personal management interview program to improve the department head/faculty member relationship.

1. **Supportive communication is problem oriented, not person oriented.** Problem oriented communication focuses on problems and solutions as opposed to blaming people. Problem-oriented communication works well during the personal management interview because the department head can focus on the faculty member's behaviors and productivity. On the other hand person-oriented communication focuses on things that cannot be controlled and might send a message of inadequacy to the faculty member. For example, calling a faculty member "irresponsible" describes the person whereas "we don't see things the same way" describes the problem. The major problem with person-oriented communication is that personality traits are not easily changed while behavior can be changed.

2. **Supportive communication is based on congruence, not incongruence.** Congruence occurs when what is said, both verbally and nonverbally, matches what the individual is thinking and feeling.[7] There is general agreement among researchers that the best relationships are based on congruence.[7-9]

Incongruence can occur under two different circumstances. First, it can occur when there is a mismatch between what one is experiencing and what one is aware of. For example, a faculty member may not be aware that he or she is experiencing hostility toward a student, even though the student can sense it. The second type of incongruence occurs when there is a mismatch between what one thinks or feels and what one communicates. This is common in relationships when one party is less than honest in its communication with the other. For example, a department head may be very upset about an incident concerning a faculty member but deny saying that the feeling exists. It is important that department heads be honest and genuine when coaching or counseling their junior faculty because, often, those who do not express what is on their mind create the perception of a "hidden agenda." If a faculty member senses that not all is being said, the relationship may become distrusting and/or superficial.

3. **Supportive communication is descriptive, not evaluative.** When a judgment is made or a label is placed on individuals or their behavior evaluative communication has taken place. A department head who says, "You did this wrong" often results in the faculty member becoming defensive. A probable response (perhaps in silence) might be "No, I did not do it wrong." Evaluative statements result in a deterioration of the department head/faculty member relationship. People often make evaluative statements when the issue is emotionally charged or when a person feels threatened.

An alternative to evaluation is **descriptive communication**. This entails three steps. First, the department head describes objectively the event, behavior, or circumstance. He or she avoids accusations and presents the data or evidence. For example, "Five students have come to me to complain about you not keeping the office hours that you stated in your syllabus." Step two entails focusing on the behavior and one's reaction, not on the faculty member's attributes. This step might include describing one's feelings and the objective consequences that have or will result. The department head might say: "I'm concerned because how can we expect students to do what they say if we don't do what we say?" The third step focuses on a solution. The department head should avoid discussing who is right or wrong and should suggest one alternative (but be open to other alternatives). He or she might suggest the following: "We both need to win back the students' confidence and show that we are responsive. I suggest you hold an extra office hour tomorrow for your students."

4. **Supportive communication validates rather than invalidates individuals.** The goal of validating communication is to help people feel valued. Invalidating communication results in negative feelings of self-worth. It denies the presence and importance of individuals by conveying superiority, rigidity, or indifference.[10]

> People often do not take time, do not listen, do not try to understand, but interrupt, anticipate, criticize, or disregard what is said; in their own remarks they are frequently vague, inconsistent, verbose, insincere, or

> dogmatic. As a result, people often conclude conversations feeling more inadequate, more misunderstood, and more alienated than when they started.[11]

On the other hand, validating communication helps people feel recognized, understood, and accepted. A major part of validating communication when there is a superior/subordinate relationship is egalitarian communication, whereby subordinates are treated as worthwhile, competent and insightful. Joint problem solving is emphasized rather than the projection of a superior position.

5. **Supportive communication is specific (useful), not global (not useful).** Generally, the more specific the communication the more motivating it will be. A department head who says to a faculty member, "You have trouble managing your time" is too general to be useful. A more specific comment might be "You spent an hour today photocopying articles when you could have asked the secretary to do it." Specific statements avoid global statements that might lead to defensiveness. For example, the global statement "You have no consideration for others' feelings" is likely to be met with a defensive statement "Yes I do, I am always considerate of others' feelings." A specific statement is much more effective: "By using sarcasm in your response to my question, you gave me the impression that you don't care about my feelings." The response is more likely to not be defensive: "I'm sorry. I know I am often sarcastic without thinking of how it affects others."

6. **Supportive communication is conjunctive, not disjunctive.** Conjunctive communication flows smoothly from what was stated previously. Disjunctive communication is disjointed and disconnected from what was said previously. Interpersonal communication between the department head and faculty member can become disjunctive in at least two ways. First, when there is not an equal opportunity to speak between the parties communication can become disjunctive. This can occur when one party dominates the conversation or interrupts the other party frequently. It is important that both department head and faculty member collaboratively communicate.

Topic control is another way that communication can become disjunctive. A unilateral decision by one party (as opposed to a bilateral decision) to decide the next topic of conversation does not foster a supportive communication process. In an empirical study of perceived communication competence, Wiemann reported that people who took turns speaking, did not hog air time, and who connected what they said to what others had said in the past were judged to be competent communicators.[12] Thus, department heads skilled at conjunctive communication may be perceived as better communicators by their junior faculty members. This can be accomplished by asking questions based on the faculty member's previous statement, by waiting for a sentence to be completed before responding, and by saying only a few sentences at a time to give the faculty member an opportunity to speak. By using conjunctive communication, the department head will not only confirm the worth of the faculty member, but will also foster teamwork and joint problem solving.

7. **Supportive communication is owned, not disowned.** Owning communication uses first-person words such as "I" and "me." Disowning communication uses third-person words or first-person plural words such as "we think" or "one might say." The problem with disowning communication is that the communicator avoids investing in the relationship because he or she has not taken responsibility for the message. A junior faculty member may perceive disowned communication from his or her department head as uncaring and aloof. It fosters ambiguity since the faculty member may feel that the department head's statements reflect someone else's viewpoint. Glasser based his approach to mental health (reality therapy) on the assumption that taking responsibility for one's statements builds both self-confidence and self-worth.[13] The same can be assumed in the department head/faculty member relationship.

8. **Supportive communication requires listening, not one-way message delivery.** The previous seven attributes of supportive communication focus on message delivery. However, just as important is listening effectively and responding to the other person's statements. "In any conversation, the person who talks the most is the one who learns the least about the other person."[14] Therefore, a good department head must be a good listener.

Listening is perceived as being important to effective communication. Kramer reported that good listening skills accounted for 40% of the variance associated with effective leadership.[15] Indeed, people judged to be the most "wise" and the most sought-after for interaction are also the best listeners.[15,16] About 80% of most people's responses are evaluative or judging. A goal of supportive communication is to suspend judgment and evaluation as a first response to a statement. This is neither easy nor automatic. When people are preoccupied with meeting their own needs (eg, I must win this discussion), have already made a prior judgment, or view the communicator negatively, poor listening re-

sults. According to Rogers and Farson, good listening conveys that:[17]

> I'm interested in you as a person, and I respect your thoughts and even if I don't agree with them, I know they are valid for you. I feel sure you have a contribution to make. I think you're worth listening to, and I want you to know I'm the kind of person you can talk to.

CONCLUSIONS

One impediment to effective communication in organizations revolves around interpersonal relationships. Supportive communication is especially critical to an effective and satisfying relationship between department heads in schools of pharmacy and their junior faculty members. This paper discussed one way to foster this relationship by incorporating eight principles of supportive communication into a regularly scheduled personal management interview program.

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