CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION

Improving Staff and Patient Experiences within Healthcare
WE MAKE
THE COMPLEX
SIMPLE AND
THE SIMPLE
MEMORABLE

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In an April 22, 2022 address at Stanford, President Barack Obama called for greater regulatory oversight of the country’s social media giants. He stated that their power to curate the information that people consume has “turbocharged” political polarization and threatened the pillars of democracy across the globe. He also suggested Constructive Communication had a role to play in improving our cultural discourse.

This was my introduction to a new concept. I had never heard of Constructive Communication before, despite consulting on brand, marketing, and communication matters for the past 20+ years. My curiosity was ignited. What is it and why would MIT create a new Center within the media lab to conduct research, educate, and confer graduate degrees in this discipline?

I set out to learn more and to explore whether Constructive Communication might have a role in helping healthcare professionals do a better job of informing, educating, and connecting with peers, patients, and the public.
OPEN

EMPATHETIC

PERSONAL

CONSTRUCTIVE

COMMUNICATION
Constructive Communication is necessary when gaps in understanding occur between those involved. To bridge this gap, those communicating must be open, empathetic, and personal.

OPENNESS
Being open to others’ thoughts and opinions is necessary for meaningful conversations to take place. However, due to tribalism, this has become difficult. When information is presented that goes against people’s beliefs, it often results in an instant defense mechanism that ends communication entirely (Mukerjee & Yang, 2020).

EMPATHY
Being able to “step into someone else’s shoes” and use empathy will allow conversations to be more productive, even in the presence of conflicting beliefs. When empathy is displayed, individuals are less likely to patronize the other, which helps in the acceptance of information (DiRusso & Stansberry, 2021; Najafbagy, 2008).

PERSONAL
The ability to speak on a personal level is essential. Blankly reciting facts without relating to others in the conversation can backfire, as people feel their beliefs and identities are being attacked (Mehl & Haidt, 2021).

The following highlights what I discovered and outlines some of the areas where utilizing Constructive Communication might be helpful within the healthcare sector.
THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
Despite the positive effects new digital media channels have, it would be unethical to ignore the larger pain points they have caused.

The digital transformation is one driver underscoring the need for Constructive Communication, as this approach has the potential to improve patient outcomes, lower recovery times, and reduce readmittance rates.

Despite the positive effects new digital media channels have, it would be unethical to ignore the larger pain points they have caused. This includes the acceleration of tribalization and the inability to make meaningful human connections with others, which has contributed to a lack of empathy and understanding within society.

The discipline of Constructive Communication might be one way to bridge the resulting trust and perceptual gap, which impedes the establishment of the mutual understanding needed to achieve better healthcare outcomes, increase staff retention, and improve the overall patient experience.

We only need to look at the 2,700+% increase in the use of Telehealth fueled by the Covid-19 pandemic to see a format where Constructive Communication can generate a positive effect. While Telehealth has become widely accepted, the medium has altered doctor-patient relationships and interactions. Both would say that adjustments need to be made to ensure that the information communicated in virtual visits is as effective as it is with in-person visits.

Constructive Communication allows for the conveyance of important information, reducing the chance of it being misunderstood. This is particularly vital in the healthcare arena where information must be correctly communicated from providers to patients.
ALONE, TOGETHER
Adrift in a Sea of Information
In today’s world, people increasingly want to feel part of a group, or a tribe, that is full of like-minded individuals (Centola, 2021). This is exacerbated by social media corporations, which have access to everyone’s preferences. Since social media companies’ main goal is to fuel engagement, they choose to present people with information that only reinforces their beliefs, furthering tribalization (Centola, 2021; Saveski et al., 2021).

In addition, the recent digital transformation has also greatly affected the amount of information and misinformation online. Web 2.0 allows anyone to receive and share information as soon as they would like, even if that information is incorrect and lacks validity (Chan et al., 2018; Jenkins et al., 2020). This allows people to produce and distribute information that can contradict messages from field experts (DiRusso & Stansberry, 2021).

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HARNESSING THE POWER OF NARRATIVE
Constructive Communication allows individuals to engage with a greater sense of common decency.

An important tool when communicating constructively is utilizing narratives. These can trigger empathy in the listener, making them more likely to acknowledge the validity of your views, even if they may not agree with them (Mehl & Haidt, 2021).

Narratives are also important in overcoming people’s beliefs in misinformation. They help individuals think through why the information is incorrect, as well as help them to empathize with others in the conversation (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2017; Ladyzhensky, 2022; Mehl & Haidt, 2021).

Constructive Communication is essential when healthcare providers communicate with staff, patients, and the public, especially as the distortions of social media and tribalism continue. In the end, it supports the Hippocratic oath of “first, do no harm.”

I believe that one would be hard-pressed to think of a situation where being more thoughtful, empathetic, and personally engaged would result in any harm, especially given the technological, medical, and generational changes that are taking place today. These changes place additional stress on doctors, staff, and patients. Therefore, anything that supports the ever-important “human element” in the delivery of care should be acknowledged and celebrated.

In the final analysis, Constructive Communication allows individuals to engage with a greater sense of common decency. This is something that has become less prevalent in the personal, business, and political discourse we find ourselves in today; and that, in and of itself, is constructive and worth trying and embracing.
Communicating with anti-vaccination advocates is one area where Constructive Communication can be useful. Due to the digital transformation of social media, anti-vaccination messages can be written by anyone and shared to reach a greater audience. Communicating with this group is a great challenge to healthcare professionals, because of the misinformation and the lack of trust present today. This represents an opportunity to practice Constructive Communication.

To communicate effectively with this group, practitioners should treat anti-vaccination advocates as equals and humanize them. Additionally, they should use narratives to make the information they are presenting more believable, and the conversation should be an equal information exchange as opposed to lecturing them in a condescending manner (DiRusso / Stansberry, 2021).
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REFERENCES


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