

The Language of Collaboration

Words have power and how they are used can lead to collaboration or to disrespect. Insulting and judgmental terms are so ingrained in our practice that we often don't realize how the terms are perceived by others.

For example, Leape et al. (2012) note that even what might be considered an innocuous term, the "waiting room" can have a disparaging intent. It implies that it is acceptable to have patients and families wait, that the provider's time is more important than that of the client. In most settings, the term "reception room" describes the room's intent more accurately and is more collaborative. If patients and families need to wait because of unintended delays, then an apology for the wait demonstrates respect.

Other examples:

- The term "noncompliant." The word infers a hierarchal relationship to subordinates and punishment or other negative consequence for disobedience. The term is regularly used for patients who do not follow a prescribed treatment plan. However, if a patient or family doesn't follow the prescribed plan, we instead need to step back and reflect on the reasons why, rather than label them in such a judgmental manner. Today's healthcare is no longer a hierarchal system in which clients are subordinates. It is a business, one in which clients hire us to help them manage their health. In the new system, we are to identify the goals that they have for their health, explore the barriers to achieving this vision, and develop a mutually acceptable plan. If the patient and family are unable to achieve the goals, we are to again explore which aspects of the plan were problematic and develop a new plan to overcome the barriers. The words "compliant" and "noncompliant" are disrespectful and have no place in this new partnership.
- The term "proper". When this term is used to describe the way in which one is to complete a task or think through a problem, it infers that all other methods are unacceptable and that those providers not doing it "properly" are substandard. It is a judgmental term. In truth, there are often many ways to achieve the same outcome and the employees of high functioning organizations are encouraged to constantly look for more efficient and more effective alternatives.
- The term "versus". The word is often used to compare two groups of providers such as physician assistants versus nurse practitioners or nursing versus medicine. The term can have negative or judgmental connotations based on the context so must be used judiciously to maintain respectful collaboration.
- The last example is the term "order." This word also infers an authoritarian or hierarchal relationship with commands to subordinates and punishment or other negative consequence for disobedience. It is contrary to a partnership in health management. The term "prescribe" does not have the same inference and yet conveys the intended meaning so is the preferred term.



Language, though is not just verbal, it is physical. When we stand over our patients, families, and colleagues, we present a hierarchal dominance that is a barrier to communication. Crossing ones arms in front, leaning on walls while we speak or listen, playing with ones' hair, chewing gum, and numerous other behaviors are common in our daily settings yet may be perceived as rude, inattentive, or closed off.

These are several examples of language, though commonly used, that are contrary to the respectful cultures we all strive for in our organizations. Consider convening a workgroup to identify disrespectful language in your organization and make a conscious plan to move to a language of collaboration.

Reference

Leape, L., Shore, M., Dienstag, J., Mayer, R., Edgman-Levitan, S.,...Healy, G. (2012). Perspective: A culture of respect, part 1: The nature and causes of disrespectful behavior by physicians. *Academic Medicine*, 87(7), 1-8.

