The Art of Communicating Safety

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"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

—George Bernard Shaw

In the past few years, we have heard new buzzwords for the strategies to develop a safety environment. Many of these concepts are now rolled into the development of a "safety culture." In his presentation at the ABSA conference this year, Paul Huntly described the progression of safety strategies throughout the years. This included starting with the basics of providing safety standards, personal protective equipment (PPE) and technical equipment, followed by risk assessments, the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs), and systems management approaches. Currently, we are attempting to develop a culture of safety through behaviors and leadership.

Intrinsic to all of these strategies is the art of communication. Now, what does that mean? Communication can mean the **methods** by which information is distributed, such as articles, audits, posters, training, or the development of SOPs. We can check boxes, blanket bulletin boards with nifty posters, and even give tests after training to "ensure" that our employees understand the material. We can check for documentation by signatures on SOPs, and make sure that appropriate PPE is available and that safety equipment is certified to provide a safe environment. This type of communication is important; but, isn't this really compliance versus understanding and behavioral acceptance?

An extremely important factor in developing an effective safety culture is **how** we, as biosafety professionals, communicate. This is truly the "art" of communication, and can affect culture through behavior. Brounstein (2001) described four styles of communicators:

1. The Dominant Communicator. Biosafety professionals using this style tend to think they are right, and researchers are wrong or misinformed, when it comes to safety practices. They use threatening language ("OSHA will cite us for this if you don't do it.") or show a lack of respect for others' perceptions of safety. This style of communicator usually provokes defiance among researchers and may damage the safety culture.
2. The Passive Communicator. New or unconfident biosafety professionals may exhibit this style early in their careers. They may be meek and feel that they shouldn't disagree with others. After all, the researchers must know a lot more about their bioagents and how to handle them safely. They may retreat from conflict and consequently create frustration since their beliefs are unknown or not communicated effectively.
3. The Passive-Aggressive Communicator. Biosafety professionals using this style of communication may prefer the e-mail route of communication instead of dealing with people directly. They may give the researcher a false sense of agreement, but, in reality, make sarcastic remarks and give the "silent treatment." They create factions in the workplace and are not to be trusted in their interpersonal communications.
4. The Empathic Communicator. The biosafety professional who is an empathetic communicator interacts with the researchers, developing long-term relationships built on trust. They understand that the opinions of others are important and should be discussed when developing realistic and effective procedures and practices. They generally communicate expectations and the reasoning behind the safety practices rather than demanding certain behaviors. Empathic communicators listen, exchange information, and collaborate with researchers to develop consensus.

I have been able to observe all four styles of communication in my 30-plus years of experience in safety. In fact, I may have tried a variety of these styles myself. However, if we truly want to develop a safety culture, we need to grow as empathic communicators in biosafety. Please allow me to suggest a few ways that I have found to be effective:

- Remember customer service. The scientific community is our customer, and we need to remember that fact. Learn to demonstrate patience, answer the phone professionally, and understand colleagues' need for appropriate safety guidance as part of the same team. After some interactions, we have actually sent out "Customer Service Surveys" to improve this service.
- Develop trust. Ask for opinions or choices. Provide references. Be realistic and work with the facilities and equipment that the researcher has in the lab. Demonstrate that you are committed to the same goals. And, finally, understand that this relationship will take time to develop.
- Listen. Researchers are more than happy to discuss their work and the stressors of current laboratory research. Learn from them, and apply what they have to say to a customized safety plan.
- Assist with paperwork to a point. Allow safety to have the reputation of being a helpful resource versus a barrier to research. An example is providing templates that ask your questions to develop a lab-specific SOP. Don't complete the paperwork for the researchers, but provide an indication

of what safety issues they need to address and what may be appropriate for their work.

- Respond in a timely manner. In more cases than not, researchers operate under time crunches to get protocols approved for grants, and we don't want to appear as the barrier in that process. If a deadline for a committee submission is close, remind them of this. They tend to be grateful for such reminders.
- Try not to introduce yourself as the Biosafety Officer, unless you are dealing with government officials who use the term. We are biosafety professionals (hence CBSPs and RBPs). The term "officer" implies someone who is searching out any non-compliance with rules. What you call yourself indicates how you view your job.

To paraphrase the Beatles, I have to admit it is getting better. Thirty years ago, the safety environment in research was a virtual wilderness. "Academic freedom" was the expectation of university researchers. Over the years, through necessity in most cases, researchers have grown to know us. New guidelines, regulations, pressures from granting agencies, and outside review have emerged to direct safe scientific research. Some researchers view safety professionals as obstructionists; others view us as partners who allow them to safely and legally conduct research. It is up to us to develop the best relationship we can to achieve a common community of safety in our institutions.

Acknowledgment

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