

THE 10-MINUTE

Easy-to-implement tips you can use in minutes—or even seconds—that will pay off every day for you and your staff

By Marli Murphy

At 4:30 a.m. while her family is still deep in dream-land, Mary Cross, MD, improves her effectiveness as a physician manager—by speed-walking.

The Houston family practitioner of nearly 20 years hits the road for 90 minutes every day to train for a 26.2 mile marathon in December. After that, it'll be back to her "easy" daily routine of speed-walking 6 miles, with a 5K competition every other Saturday. "Speed-walking is definitely my stress outlet," she explains, and working off stress in the wee hours of the morning—without fail—helps her be a more effective manager throughout the work day.

"I think I'm also a better parent and a better person to be around because of it," she says. "I can't imagine not sweating at something every day! Daily stressors don't get blown out of proportion, because I'm too tired," she joked.

In Kansas City, Missouri, Myral Coatney, DO, improves his effectiveness as a physician manager by tracking down both of his nurses, his receptionist, and his file clerk to greet them individually and speak with them for a few minutes before he begins seeing patients each morning. It's a gesture he began early in his career and one he's stuck with every workday for the past 42 years. What's more, he doesn't leave the office until he's said goodbye to each employee, and he requires the staff to do the same.

"The niceties help build rapport," he says. "To be an effective people manager, you've got to be interested in your people and you've got to convey that."

Born to heal, must learn to manage

Working at improving management skills within the confines of a busy medical day is a real challenge, but Coatney and Cross both firmly believe it's imperative for today's physicians to do so. "Management skills do not come naturally to most doctors," Cross admits. "We are healers, not hirers."

Judi Moreo agrees wholeheartedly, after training some 200,000 professionals in 26 countries

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Physician MANAGER



PHOTO/DAN WHITE

Myral Coatney, DO, says that whenever he is “put out” with an employee, he remembers their contributions. “I stop and remind myself why I hired this employee in the first place, what their talents are, what all they’ve done for the office.” This often helps him put the “offense” into perspective.

MANAGING PEOPLE: THE 10-MINUTE PHYSICIAN MANAGER

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in communication, assertiveness and management skills. "Doctors are educated to save lives, not to manage people in an office environment," she notes.

That doesn't mean, however, that any physician without an MBA is a lost cause as a manager, says Moreo, who co-owns Turning Point International, a human potential development and training organization with offices in Las Vegas, Nevada, and Johannesburg, South Africa. In fact, she says that many techniques for boosting managerial effectiveness take only a few minutes to apply—and some take only seconds.

Want to make a big impact on your workplace in a small amount of time? Coatney, Cross, and Moreo offer the following ideas, courtesy of a combined 95 years of management experience.

1. *Do the things that only you can do and delegate the rest. Delegation not only frees you up for your patients, it can be used as a motivator and an educational opportunity for your employees.*
2. *Explain clearly the results you want to achieve, then determine with employees the best plan for getting those results.*
3. *Use courtesy words when speaking with employees. Make it a firm habit to say, "please," "thank you," "I appreciate that," "You're welcome," "Certainly," "Would you please." This gesture shows respect and fosters teamwork.*
4. *Always call employees by name. If you don't know his or her name, Moreo says, that's your first problem.*
5. *Hire only employees who "fit" your management style. Moreo recommends*

making a list of the seven most important qualities/skills that people who work with you must possess to "fit" your style of working. If you're gregarious and outgoing, you'll enjoy working with those who are also. If you're quiet and introspective, working closely with employees who're naturally chatty may drive you nuts—and they may get their feelings hurt when

they receive what they perceive as "the silent treatment" from you.

6. *To reduce miscommunication, ask employees to repeat instructions you've given. "I once knew a manager who had every employee wear a button that read, 'Say it back to me,' and everyone in the company did it," Moreo explains. After a year, profits had gone up, the safety*



PHOTO/PAMELA FRANCIS

Mary Cross, MD, says she's generated employee loyalty by creating a team-oriented work environment. "The physician must never be 'too good' to pitch in on any task if time allows."

record was greatly improved, the number of mistakes was reduced, and as a side benefit they weren't expecting, they'd built a much stronger team. Studies show on average that we absorb only about 30 percent of what we hear—and that's under nearly perfect circumstances. That means that much of what you say to your employees either isn't being heard or isn't being understood. By making a habit of asking the employee to paraphrase what you've said, you'll eliminate misunderstandings, reduce mistakes, and avoid hurt feelings due to miscommunication. So how do you require this of employees without them getting defensive? The key, according to Moreo, is to ask every time you give an instruction: "To make sure we're clear, would you repeat that, please?" If the request applies to all employees, no one will take offense. "You've got to teach employees how to communicate best with YOU," Moreo adds.

7. Hire people who genuinely like people. This will reduce the number of situations you have to deal with where employees have spoken rudely to patients, dealt with patients in an uncaring manner, or cannot get along with co-workers.

8. Train all employees in assertiveness skills and in dealing with difficult people. Moreo is biased toward this recommendation, she admits, being in the training and development industry. However, employees in physicians' offices have to deal constantly—in person and over the phone—with difficult people and difficult situations. The nicest people in the world can be a nightmare to deal with when they're distraught over a sick child, stressed out over how they're going to pay the bill, or upset and confused because they don't feel well. Training employees in how to finesse high-pressure situations in a compassionate and

efficient manner creates better service for patients and keeps the office running more smoothly, Moreo explains. Assertiveness training also will reduce the employees' levels of stress and frustration on the job, Moreo adds, because they'll be more effective in all their exchanges—with patients and with co-workers.

9. Get rid of things in the office you haven't

used in the last year. Sell them, donate them, or toss them, but don't let useless stuff clutter up the space you need for things you actually use.

10. Block off 15 minutes on the calendar every day for management planning. One minute of planning saves three to four minutes of work. This is time to spend thinking about

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Listen up, Listen well

Improve your listening skills, and you'll not only double your communication effectiveness — you'll foster loyalty in your employees.

"To be listened to is a major psychological need," says Micki Holliday, a 25-year



Micki Holliday

training specialist.

"When you really listen to employees—give them your full attention—you're acknowledging that you value them. The reason so many managers aren't respected by their employees, frankly, is because they don't listen."

The director of faculty and curriculum for National Seminars Group, Inc., headquartered in Shawnee Mission, Kansas, Holliday preaches the gospel of becoming a better manager by becoming a better listener. And the ugly truth is that effective listening is hard work, Holliday says. "Most people consider themselves good listeners, but

few people really are. Becoming an effective listener really takes practice."

Holliday gives professionals six easy steps for improving their listening skills:

1. Look at the person speaking. Research shows that 55 percent of the meaning of any message is non-verbal and comes from facial expressions and body language. Therefore, if you're doing something else while you're listening and don't have your eyes on the person speaking, you're missing more than half the meaning of their message.

2. Be silent. Interrupting the speaker, even to say something encouraging, derails that person's thought process. "When you interrupt, it's like shutting off a faucet. You shut down communication," Holliday says.

3. Quiet your body language and lean in toward the person speaking. This will help you focus on the speaker and will let him or her know you're being attentive.

4. Tune in not only to what

is being said, but how it's being said. Is the speaker hesitant? Frustrated? Highly emotional? Disgusted?

5. Be conscious of barriers to effective listening. "Barriers that can really keep us from listening effectively include our own emotional state, noise distractions in the room, and pre-judgment, which means we've decided we already know what the other person is going to say. You have to be conscious of those barriers and fight against them to keep an open mind to what you're hearing," Holliday explains.

6. Test for understanding. When the speaker is finished, paraphrase what you've heard to make sure you're clear. "So often, what someone actually says isn't what they meant to say, or isn't what they thought they said," Holliday notes.

"Effective listening isn't just about gathering accurate information," she concludes. "Listening equates to caring. It conveys respect and builds teamwork." ■

overall results you want for your office, not just, "What's on my list for today?"

11. Make lists, and prioritize the list daily.

12. Keep your lists and notes all in the same planner, book, notebook, or whatever works best for you—not on scraps of paper or post-its stuck in various places.

13. Make a conscious effort to speak more slowly—you'll be better understood by both employees and patients. "Many doctors speak to people as if they're dictating," Coatney says. "You must talk to people, not at them. That's how you establish trust."

14. Whenever possible, tackle the toughest things you've got to do early in the day.

15. Return phone calls in a block of time. Coatney returns only emergency calls during his work day, then makes a group of calls at the beginning and the end of his work day. Cross relies on the fax machine and e-mail to return messages early in the morning before she begins seeing patients. Both find that trying to sandwich in a quick return call here and there during the day breaks concentration and consumes time needed for patients.

16. Take a few minutes before you see the first patient to speak with employees—every single day. Coatney has found this to be an excellent technique for building staff rapport and fostering teamwork.

17. Take active steps to create a friendly, team-oriented work environment for employees. This has become Cross' creed in her 20 years of solo practice. "The key to effective managing is having good, experienced, and ever-learning personnel working for you," she says, "and it's difficult to get good help and keep it. Most offices cannot afford to be competitive with hospitals and large clinics as far as salaries and benefits, so we have to provide a friendlier work environment to make up for the lack of other goodies." Toward that end,

Cross said, "The physician must never be 'too good' to pitch in on any task if time allows. I think the main thing is never to ask anybody to do something that you aren't willing to do and or haven't done yourself." She makes a point not only to remember staff birthdays and holidays, but to do the unexpected every now and then, like bring in flowers for everyone or take the office to lunch. "And it's important to share the goodies that patients and others bring in or send—don't cart it all home for oneself. It's amazing what goodwill small things can generate!"

Such efforts toward establishing a friendly, team-oriented workplace have paid off for Cross in the form of employee loyalty. "I've been very fortunate to have had some of the same people for many years, and to have them feel about my practice like it is partly their practice, too." Her office manager, for example, has been with her since the beginning, "and I simply won't let her retire until I die," Cross jokes.

18. If you can afford to give someone else the job, do it!

19. Find organizational supplies that make sense to you and use them. When you've got a place for everything, you cut down enormously on the time and frustration you'd otherwise spend looking for things. If organizing doesn't come naturally to you, get someone else to set up the system for you.

20. Learn how to say NO, politely but firmly. This is something physicians have to work especially hard at, Moreo stresses, because as healers, they are by nature people who want to help. "But saying yes to everything decreases the chances of successfully completing anything. Don't over-commit yourself."

21. Be specific in your instructions. "If you say to your front office employees, 'I want

our office to seem warm and friendly to our patients,' what does that really mean?"

Moreo asks. "You've got to define specifically what you want to happen and give them specific standards to meet. Say, 'So our office feels warm and friendly to our patients, I want you to greet each patient who comes in the door. Make direct eye contact and smile, then ask them to register and please have a seat.' Instead of telling a nurse, 'You've got to be more caring toward our patients!' define exactly what you mean by 'caring.' You could say, 'I want you to greet the patient by name and explain the procedure you're doing as you do it.'" When employees have specific standards to meet rather than vague directions, they know the goal and can work to achieve it.

22. Have all calls screened thoroughly. Coatney never returns a call if he doesn't know what it is in reference to. It's a policy he learned the hard way: In the early years of his practice, his office manager was so fooled by a smooth-talking salesperson who needed to speak "urgently" with the doctor that she had him paged while he and his wife were vacationing in Hawaii.

23. Don't answer immediately when something important has been said to you. Stop a moment. Think about what you've heard. Then answer.

24. Scan reading materials quickly and decide promptly what to do with them. Act on it now to file it, send it on, or toss it—don't make another pile.

25. Take only "action items" to your desk. Move your in-box elsewhere. That way, a quick glance at your desktop shows you what still must be done.

26. Change "you" statements to "I" statements when talking to employees about work performance issues. Instead of saying, "You were late again this morning," say, "I

need you to be at work on time every morning so we can give our patients the kind of care they deserve." Instead of, "You were gone 15 minutes too long for lunch today!" say, "I can only spare you an hour for lunch every day, because I need your assistance here in the office so we can keep up with the workload."

27. Be prepared to get voice-mail whenever you return a call. Have your message thought out so you'll state the most important points first. If the voice mailbox has a short period of time allowed for the message, you'll get yours delivered without being cut off and save the need to call back with an "add-on" message.

28. Reward and recognize positive employee behavior. "Behavior rewarded is behavior repeated," Moreo says. "Positive reward and recognition fosters loyalty. Your people will work smarter and harder for you."

29. "Remember why you hired 'em." Coatney has found this an invaluable piece of advice to reflect upon over the years whenever he is "put out" with an employee. "I stop and remind myself why I hired this employee in the first place, what their talents are, what all they've done for the office," he explains. This often helps him put the "offense" in perspective.

30. Don't put off firing an employee if there is a need to do so. "This does not come naturally to those of us who hate change, even if it may be for the good," Cross notes, but the longer you wait, the more difficult the task will become.

31. Cross-train all personnel to more than one position.

32. Utilize technology to save time whenever possible. Cross has employees fax forms ahead to new patients with access to

a fax machine. That way, insurance can be verified and charts made ready before the appointment time arrives.

33. Use simple medication sheets in the charts so that nursing staff can update and pre-write prescriptions for chronic meds and renewals.

34. Offer praise often for a job well done. Praise should be specific, as in, "Marie, you did a great job calming down Mrs. Jones when she was so upset at the front desk this morning. I really appreciate your skills in comforting our patients." This is much more effective than, "Good job, everyone!"

35. Seek out management training opportunities. Cross has taken courses at the University of Texas in management and promoting a positive image, and Coatney has attended numerous seminars and courses relating to people-management skills over the years. He's also been a voracious reader of books on medical economics and business management. ■

Marli Murphy is a regular contributor to UO. Her last article, "Setting the Right Example," appeared in our November/December 1998 issue.