

*The Patient Experience Post*

Healthcare’s Resource for  
Service Excellence  
July 2017



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## 5+ Unintended Messages You May Be Sending to Your Patients

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

Each day you engage in multiple interactions with patients, visitors and colleagues. Those interactions don’t always go as planned. While you may *think* the message you intended to send is the message the patient received, that isn’t always the case. In fact, given the stress that most patients are under when they’re in healthcare settings, there’s a high likelihood that *many* of your messages are being misconstrued. That’s why it’s important to monitor for cues that you’re on the same page.

In our work, we do shadow coaching with physicians and nurses. This gives us the opportunity to give feedback on communication styles and pick up on cues about how patients perceive various messages. It has been fascinating to explore the intent behind messages sent, as well as what patients heard, and the impressions patients are left with after interacting with providers.

Here are some common examples:

What was Said	What was Meant	What the Patient Heard
“That’s not my job.”	“I’m not familiar with this process, so I don’t know what to do. I’ll have to get someone who knows.”	This person takes no initiative and only does the minimum. They’re not really interested in helping me at all.
“I’m not allowed to...”	“I’m restricted by important safety policies, so I’m not able to do that.”	The management is very controlling here.
“The X shift was supposed to do this.”	“I carry my weight, but my colleagues aren’t doing what they’re supposed to.”	People around here are unreliable. They don’t get the work done and they pass the buck.
“That practice is closed.”	“The doctor isn’t taking new patients.”	They’ve been shut down!
“Why didn’t you come in sooner?”	“I wish I could have helped you sooner so it didn’t get so bad.”	This doctor thinks I’m an idiot! I should have known better.

Healthcare providers are highly skilled in what they do, and many have done what they do for a long time. Unfortunately, the longer we do something the more we tend to take for granted that what we know and attempt to convey to others is obvious and easily understood. Far too often, that’s simply not the case.

It’s important to think carefully, and critically, about what you’re communicating to patients and to try to discern whether what they hear is what you intended.

1. Listen with your eyes – in other words, watch their body language.
2. Get feedback from a shadow – It can be helpful to engage colleagues in helping to “listen in” and to point out to each other when something might have been perceived in a different way than what was intended. Give your colleagues permission to provide you with that feedback so that when they,

for instance, notice a harsh tone or feel something could easily be misinterpreted they can pull you aside to say: “You know, I don’t think you intended...but when you said...the patient may have perceived...” Use these situations as teaching opportunities. And if you are on the receiving end of feedback, be a gracious recipient. Ask for suggestions about better ways to phrase something.

3. Avoid trigger words. Certain words can put others on the defensive. Beginning a sentence with why is one of them. Why did you wait? Why didn’t you call? Even asking, “Why are you here?” can unintentionally put people on the defensive.

Working on communication skills is a lifelong endeavor. Getting feedback can offer incredible insight on how you are perceived.

Want to improve communication skills throughout the organization? We have coaching materials that can help. Check out our new [“The Power of One—Make Every Encounter Count”](#) training program, a session designed to provide you with new insights into how to take ownership of every encounter—and how to turn every encounter into an exceptional patient experience. We also offer a [phone skills session](#) that focuses on the essentials of a great phone encounter.

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Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare’s Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader’s Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery shopping, and training services for improving the patient experience. To learn more, please visit <http://baird-group.com> or call 920-563-4684