Managerial Effectiveness:
A Quick Guide to Setting Clear Expectations

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As an experienced medical writer, you have spent years honing your skills—perhaps you have earned an AMWA certificate, become a certified Editor in the Life Sciences, and have an advanced degree in a scientific or humanities discipline. Your skills may have developed to the point that you have been promoted, or you own a freelance business and have taken on employees or subcontractors. In these cases, your daily tasks involve more than just writing, they now include managing and leading other people—colleagues, clients, and vendors. To be an effective manager in the medical writing field, or any field, requires clear, concise communication.

One of the most important types of communication in the workplace involves setting expectations, ie, requesting that someone else do something. This article highlights what you need to know about yourself and others to be a good interpersonal communicator. It outlines a five-step process[1] for setting clear, effective expectations of those you lead. To execute this process with maximum benefit, it is essential that you first understand yourself—your strengths, weaknesses, and motivation.

Know Thyself
To communicate well with others and to be an effective manager and leader, you must first know yourself. How well do you really know your strengths, weaknesses, and what drives you? As Marshall Goldsmith explains in his best-selling book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There,*[2] you have achieved your current success because of the many strengths you have. However, you have also achieved your current success despite your weaknesses. It is not enough to be a skilled and experienced professional; you must be skilled in personal interactions. This skill grows in importance as your career progresses. As Goldsmith puts it, "… interpersonal behavior is the difference-maker between being great and near-great, between getting the gold and settling for the bronze."

Strengths
Your strengths led to your current success. How do these strengths manifest in your work? Focus on observable behaviors, not your skills. To help you identify your strengths and describe their impact, answer the following questions:
- What do you do well?
- What is the positive impact or outcome of your strength in action?
- What feedback have you gotten regarding this strength?

Weaknesses
Your weaknesses are the obstacles to moving forward in your career. You need to identify them before you can correct them. Calling your weaknesses areas for improvement or limiting behaviors may be less of a bitter pill. Whatever you call them, weaknesses are the behaviors that get in your way, hold you back, and have a negative impact on your work outcomes and your goals. The next step is to fine tune a description of your weakness to make sure it is an observable behavior. If you can't observe it or measure it, you can't do anything about it. To help you identify and describe a crucial weakness, answer the following questions:
- What could you do better than you are doing now?
- What does this behavior look like?
- When does it happen? In particular circumstances? With particular people?
- What is the negative impact of this behavior?
- What would be the positive impact of changing this behavior?

For example, you may identify your weakness as poor interpersonal communication skills. However, the inability to communicate clearly with others is actually the outcome. It is a symptom of a weakness that is deeper. It might be that you are uncomfortable with conflict. The observable behavior may show up as failing to convey unpleasant but necessary information to an employee as a means to avoid an argument. Try to describe your weakness as clearly as possible and consider the negative impact it has on your success.

Motivation
Understanding what motivates you is a key step in evaluating your effectiveness, because passions taken to an extreme can become weaknesses. For example, you might be driven to continually acquire new knowledge. Such a motivation serves you well in moving ahead in your field of expertise, but if it is taken too far, you may be perceived by coworkers as a know-it-all. Your employees may hesitate to ask you necessary questions for fear of appearing unintelligent. Consider how your motivators serve you and whether they may have become a weakness.

Setting Expectations

As a supervisor or manager, you are responsible for making sure that certain tasks get done well and on time. Often, you assign your employees the responsibility for these tasks. You can maximize the chances that the task will get done well by setting clear expectations. An effective process for setting clear expectations involves the following five steps.[1]
1. Pre-work
2. Communication
3. Commitment
4. Consequences
5. Coaching

Pre-work

Setting clear expectations occurs well before you utter the first directive. The first step in pre-work is considering how your weaknesses might affect how you set the expectation. For example, if you are uncomfortable with conflict, how will you set an expectation with someone likely to argue or resist? Furthermore, think about the motivations of those for whom you are setting the expectation. How can you integrate the task into what motivates them?

The next step in pre-work is clearly and comprehensively identifying the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the task to be done. This step is important because it helps you identify missing information. It also helps you make important decisions about things that you may not have considered yet. Colleagues cannot meet your expectations if you are not clear about exactly what you want and expect.

Communication

Make time to meet with the people to whom you will be assigning the tasks. Do not convey the information in passing. Keep your meeting focused on the task. Clearly explain the who, what, when, where, how, and why that you articulated for yourself during the pre-work. Try to integrate the work into what is important to your employee. Ask questions to determine whether your employees need additional information.

Commitment

It is not enough to simply verbalize the specifics of the task to your employees. It is important that you ensure their agreement. Listen carefully; be sensitive to their tone as well as their word choices. Pay careful attention to body language. Make sure they understand clearly what is expected. For this you need their feedback. A simple question such as "What do you think?" can help you determine buy-in and bring out any potential obstacles. It can be helpful to ask what they anticipate as difficulties so you can address them early on. This is a crucial step. You must make sure your employees are committed and clearly understand what is expected of them. Do not assume they heard and understood everything you said. In a group setting, you might ask each person to recap what's on their to-do list before you end the meeting. One-on-one, you might ask each person to repeat their action items to ensure you told them everything.

Consequences

Your employees may need to understand what is at stake to engage their motivation. Be clear about both positive and negative consequences. What is the advantage of completing the project as expected? Do not avoid articulating the negative consequences of a job poorly executed. People perform best when accountability structures are set, clearly defined, and consistently followed. Everyone, including you, needs to know whom they are accountable to, whom they are accountable for, and what they are accountable for.

Coaching

Providing an opportunity to monitor progress is a key and often overlooked step in maximizing the success of the assigned task. Don't walk away from the meeting without establishing a time to follow-up. This will be an opportunity for you to offer recognition for work well done. It is a chance to offer help or support around obstacles that may have arisen. It is also an opportunity to recognize that the expectation was not clearly understood and to reset the course before the deadline. As a coach, you need to listen well,[3] watch closely, and ask the right questions.[4] Do not underestimate the importance of this step. Set a specific follow-up meeting time. Do not simply tell your employee that you will be available if they have any questions. Setting a specific follow-up time increases accountability; everyone knows that they are expected to report on their progress, and this helps them to be prepared. Conversely, if no progress has been made or they are not prepared to report on it, you become aware of a potential performance issue before the project is due.

The next time you set an expectation of those you supervise, rate how well you executed these five steps. Acknowledge those areas that you did well and identify steps you could improve on the next time. Remember, implementing a new behavior takes practice. You will make progress and you may also regress. The important thing is to keep practicing until it becomes second nature.

References
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Society for Technical Communication

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The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is an individual membership organization dedicated to advancing technical communication. The Society's members include every field of the technical communication profession across every industry and continent, with members in almost 50 countries. The Society is currently working to grow their presence in China and the Indian subcontinent.

The lines of technical communication and medical communication have been blurred. The Bureau of Labor Statistics considers medical communication to be one type of technical communication. However, most medical communicators do not think of themselves as part of a larger group of "technical" communicators. Some do, though, with approximately 10% of respondents to the most recent (2010) AMWA membership survey saying that they also belong to STC, making it the fifth-leading additional membership for AMWA members. STC publications, meetings, and annual conference offer opportunities to learn more about the technology of writing, including software that enhances writing and publication. Another technical writing specialty is procedure writing and documentation, which might be of interest to writers in pharmaceutical companies and medical manufacturers.

STC's more than 60 geographic chapters produce a wide array of events throughout the year designed to advance the knowledge of members, promote technical communication education globally, and enhance networking with others in the profession. In addition to the geographical chapters, more than 20 Special Interest Groups (SIGs) are virtually targeted at specific areas of the profession such as technical editing, usability, and content strategy. Among the SIGs that may be of particular interest to medical communicators are Scientific Communication; Environmental, Safety, and Health Communication; Marketing Communication; and Emerging Technology.

The Society provides a wide variety of education in support of the profession and the members. Live webinars are held several times a month. STC certificate programs allow members to explore a subject in-depth through multiple online courses over a period of several weeks; participants develop practical skills, interact with the instructor, and exchange ideas and tools virtually with other participants.

The 2012 STC Summit (annual meeting) was held on May 20-23, 2012, in Rosemont, IL, and offered more than 80 sessions organized by 10 tracks. You can access many slide presentations from the Summit at **http://summit.stc.org**.

STC produces two award-winning publications. *Intercom*, a monthly magazine, publishes articles about the issues and topics that drive the conversation in the world of technical communication, providing practical examples and applications of technical communication to promote readers' professional development. *Technical Communication* (peer reviewed) is published quarterly and includes both quantitative and qualitative research while showcasing the work of the field's most noteworthy writers. Another publication is the Salary Database (drawn from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics) and is available to members for a small fee and to nonmembers for a higher fee.

STC dues, which start at $215, are based on a la carte member choices of services and levels of education. In addition to receiving member rates for all educational opportunities, membership benefits include access to the STC Job Bank as well as STC's social networking site, MYSTC.

STC has made some important steps to heighten awareness of medical communication among its members. One such step was to request an article about AMWA and medical communication for an issue of *Intercom*.[1] (This article is available on the AMWA website at **www.amwa.org/default/prof.devo/stc.medicalcommunication.2010.05.pdf**.) In addition, STC has agreed to circulate AMWA's Job Analysis Survey to its members, giving the organization the opportunity to help in determining how medical writers are defined in the future (*see page 54*).

Through enhanced relationship-building with AMWA, STC leadership is anticipating a more productive partnership with AMWA. "We want to work cooperatively to ensure that both organizations benefit each other's members," says Kathryn Burton, FASAE, CAE, STC's Executive Director/CEO. "We already offer reciprocal member rates for events such as conferences and educational opportunities and advertise each other's conferences in our publications. We look forward to sharing knowledge and professional growth opportunities."

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