

By Roger P. Levin, DDS



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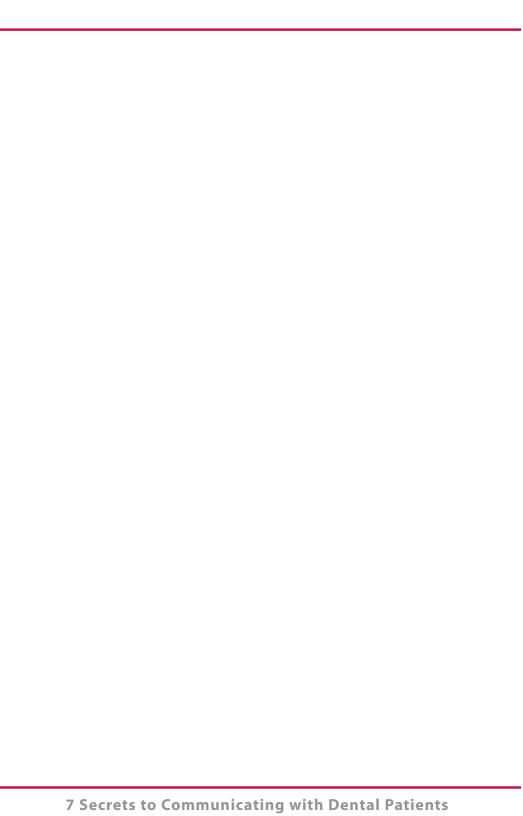
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#### INTRODUCTION

My grandfather and father, who were also dentists, taught me that, other than the quality of dental treatment we provide to our patients, there is nothing more important than how we communicate with them.

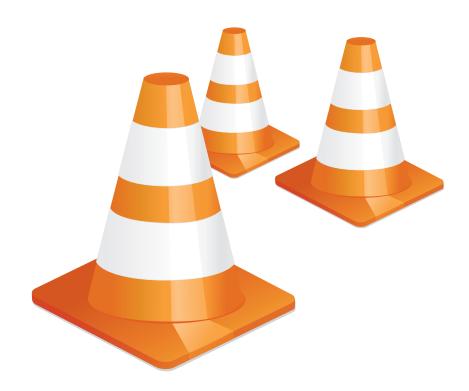
When you communicate well with your patients, they will accept more recommended treatment, comply with your treatment guidelines, and be happier to have you as their dentist. Poor communication can mean patients will reject your recommendations, not follow your instructions, and leave your practice. Fortunately, this can be avoided. I am pleased to share with you the very important information I have learned - *The Seven Secrets to Communicating with Dental Patients*.

"Improving the lives of dentists" has been the mission of the consulting firm I founded more than 25 years ago and I am truly honored to help you reach your goals.

Roger P. Levin, DDS

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Chairman & CEO, Levin Group, Inc.





# Seeing the Obstacles to Communicating with Dental Patients

As you become a Great Communicator, the first task is to recognize what has held you back from communicating well with your patients. There have been times, I am sure, when you wanted to explain treatment to a patient or understand what they were saying but you both struggled and became frustrated.

No matter how hard you both tried, you could not understand each other.

Situations like this happen every day in dental practices just like yours and you are not at all alone. Dentists from France to Indonesia and all points in between have told me that patient communication can sometimes be painful and laborious. Words like "painful," "laborious," "puzzling," and "troublesome" often come up in conversations with dentists that say they have difficulty talking with patients.

The problem is that when dentists become too frustrated with patient communication, they pull back from patients and stop communicating and so do patients. That makes the doctor-patient relationship harder to manage.

There is a kind of wall between patients and doctors that makes things hard for both sides to communicate.

of patient communication during one of my mountain-climbing experiences while I was in college.

My fellow climbers and I were ascending Mt. Hood in Oregon when we realized we had not properly planned our route to the summit.

The team began bickering which cost us valuable time and I saw that we would miss our chance to reach the peak before sunset if we did not quickly agree on a plan.

The solution was to identify the frame of mind of my fellow climbers before trying to say anything else.

Only then would I be able to come up with a way to communicate with them. The technique worked and, to this day, all of our consultants at Levin Group teach it to our clients.

When you have patients that you are having a very difficult time communicating with, you should stop speaking and start watching and listening to them very carefully. As an exercise now, I want you to take two minutes and think of a tough experience you recently had while communicating with a patient. Use the following words to help you spot the special challenges that patient presented.

- □ Inflexible
- □ Conceited
- Depressed
- ☐ Critical
- Dogmatic
- □ Cunning
- Judgmental

- ☐ Gossiping
- Obnoxious
- □ Controlling
- □ Demanding
- □ Grudge
- Superficial
- Negotiating

You probably do not want to think too much about that experience because it was unpleasant for you since you felt you weren't in control of the situation. Now that you've seen how to categorize the patient's behavior, you should start to feel more removed from how the patient was behaving and more focused on how to assess his or her approach. Assessing the patient's approach is the first step toward becoming a Great Communicator.



I also want you to ask these questions of yourself next time you find yourself dealing with a difficult patient:



- 1. What does my patient really want?
- **2.** What questions can I ask to clarify what my patient really wants?
- 3. Have I said anything that has confused or provoked my patient?

Once you've categorized your patient's approach and asked yourself these three questions, you will have taken the first step toward changing the outcome.

This will make all the difference between being aimlessly caught up in a discussion versus guiding it.





Now that you've learned how to categorize your difficult patients' personality, and therefore their approach to a situation, you will need to understand how to identify *any* patient's personality. There are infinite kinds of people but there are really only four types of personality. The four types of personality are:



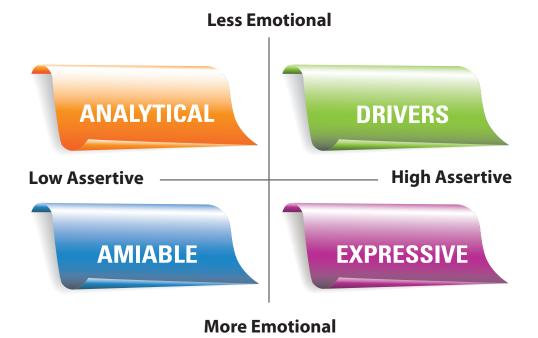
If you're like most dentists, you've probably already started to analyze the personality of someone you know – yourself! You'll notice in your own personality that you have some characteristics of two or maybe even three of the types. But after I have shared more information with you, you will see that you mainly fit in just one category. And you will also see how to spot your patients' personality types very quickly.

The relationship between these four personality types is really very simple. Ask yourself these two questions when communicating with a patient:



- **1.** Is my patient more or less emotional than others?
- **2.** Is my patient more or less assertive than others?

Once you've answered those two questions, you've found the personality type of your patient. Here is an illustration to help you see what I mean.



Let's go deeper into the details to see what makes these personality types different from each other.

For every personality type there are four categories of important information:

 Communication Style
 Communication Advantages
 Communication Disadvantages

You can use the four categories of information for the four personality types in every interaction with one of your patients. The key is to make a habit of analyzing each individual's personality so that you can communicate with them effectively. Take five minutes now to write down the names of three people you know that fit into each personality type (12 people in total) in the blank spaces next to each of the categories listed.

4. Personality Goal

### **EXPRESSIVE**

**Goal:** "I like to have fun in life"

| Style    | Advantages | Disadvantages  | Your Patients |
|----------|------------|--|---------------|
| Exciting | Charisma   | Talks a Lot  |               |
| Fun      | Charm      | Desires Attention  |               |
| Colorful | Magnetic   | Poor with Details  |               |
| Humorous | Motivating | Poor Follow-through<br>Limited Achievement<br>Poorly Organized |               |

### **ANALYTICAL**

**Goal:** "I like to do it right"

| Style         | Advantages | Disadvantages             | Your Patients |
|---------------|------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Deep          | Factual    | Asks Lots of<br>Questions |               |
| Thoughtful    | Organized  | Wants Proof               |               |
| Introspective | Monotone   | Technical                 |               |
| Philosophical | No Humor   | Critical<br>Perfectionist |               |

### **DRIVERS**

**Goal:** "I like to do things my way"

| Style              | Advantages    | Disadvantages                         | Your Patients |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| Self-<br>Motivated | Confident     | Tough                                 |               |
| Good<br>Leaders    | Strong-willed | Not Sympathetic                       |               |
| Innovative         | Organized     | Creates<br>Controversy                |               |
| Self-<br>Assured   | Stimulating   | Manipulative<br>Snobbish<br>Impatient |               |

### **AMIABLE**

**Goal:** "I like to find the easy way"

| Style            | Advantages              | Disadvantages                   | Your Patients |
|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|
| Even<br>Tempered | Friendly                | Wants to be Liked               |               |
| Peaceful         | Agreeable               | Indecisive                      |               |
| Uninvolved       | Takes Easy<br>Route     | Resents Change                  |               |
| Few Goals        | Moderately<br>Organized | Appears Happy but<br>may Not Be |               |





Becoming a Great Communicator is not just about understanding your patients better. It is also about understanding *yourself* better. Too often we forget to think about our communication styles, our communication advantages and disadvantages, and our own personality – and it can hold us back.



The best lesson I ever got on what happens when someone pays too little attention to their own situation occurred when I was underwater. Like my colleague and friend, Dr. Ken Zhang of Procter & Gamble, I have enjoyed deep sea scuba diving for years. On a dive in the Caribbean some years ago, my dive companions and I were enthralled by the beauty of the coral reef, the fish, and the crystal clear water. One of my dive companions was so mesmerized by a Rock Beauty Angelfish that she wandered away from the group and lost track of time. Our dive guide had to find her and let her know that she was running low on the air that she had forgotten to monitor and needed to surface safely but quickly! Whether you're diving or talking with patients, you have to be aware of your surroundings and your own situation.

So, let's find out which one of the four personality types you are. I'd like you to answer the questions and then add the points together to come up with your personality score. (See page 28 for instructions)

Choose the response that best fits your own thought and circle the letter.



#### 1. When someone gives me their opinion, I

- a. Need time to think it through completely
- b. Have my own opinion right away
- c. Would not tell them that I disagree
- d. Like to hear more about their opinion

#### 2. When I meet someone new, I

- a. Like to learn about them
- b. Tell them about myself
- c. Find something they want to talk about
- d. Enjoy just having a conversation about anything

### My friends would say that they admire me for being

- a. Thoughtful
- b. Energetic
- c. Calm
- d. Happy

# 4. I feel that the most important aspect of a group project is that

- a. The job is done correctly
- b. The job is finished without delay
- c. Everyone on the team gets along
- d. The team actually enjoys the work

# 5. When someone tells me a story about themselves, I

- a. Consider why they are telling me this story
- b. Hope the story does not take too long
- c. Enjoy hearing stories about other people
- d. Want to share a story about myself, too

## At a gathering of people I do not know,I often feel

- a. Hesitant about meeting the other people
- b. Confident that I can fit in
- c. A little disconnected
- d. Eager to make friends

#### 7. When solving a problem, my approach is to

- a. Be sure I understand the problem
- b. Quickly solve the problem
- c. Find others who can help solve the problem with me
- d. Put in my best effort and see how it turns out

# If someone tells me they are feeling unhappy,I usually respond by

- a. Trying to find out why they feel that way
- b. Asking them what they want me to do
- c. Consoling them
- d. Trying to change their mood

### When I am in a tense or confrontational situation with someone, I often

- a. Pull back and become quiet
- b. Try to get them to see my perspective
- c. Try to see things from their point-of-view
- d. Put it behind us by moving on to another topic

# 10. I would be most disappointed if other people thought I was

- a. Pushy
- b. Lazy
- c. Mean
- d. Boring



#### **Scoring**

For each letter you chose, score a certain number of points:

$$A = 1$$
  $B = 2$   $C = 3$   $D = 4$ 

Total your scores based on your letter choices.
Your score determines which personality type

you are by falling into a range:

Your personality type tells you which types of patients you find it easier or harder to communicate with. It will be fairly easy for you to talk with patients who are the same personality type since you think and act in similar ways. You will also find that one or two of the other personality types are not much of a stretch for you to communicate with. But, if you're being completely honest, you'll have to admit that at least one of the personality types is harder for you to understand.



I would like you to write down the one personality type that you have trouble dealing with in your practice. Then, write down the reasons why it is harder for you to communicate with patients that have this personality type.

- **1.** *I find it harder to communicate with:*
- **2.** It's harder to communicate with these types of patients because:
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c.
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_

It is very important that you recognize which personality types you work well with and those you do not so that you can prepare yourself for every situation. It is also helpful for you to see why you find it harder to communicate with one patient type so that you can avoid conflict with these people and find ways to overcome these obstacles.

In the next section, I will share extremely valuable tools to help you improve your communication with not only the patients you have the most difficulty dealing with but even your favorite patients!







Now and again, you probably feel that some patients just do not want to see you. It is true that patients do not want to be in pain and may be a little anxious (sometimes a lot) about visiting a dentist, but it's really not about avoiding *you*. Patients actually want to like you as their dentist. That is a great starting point for you to improve your interactions with them.

In order for your patients to trust you, they have to feel comfortable with you. You can help your patients feel more comfortable by taking care of "The 5 C's".



Like most dentists, you think a lot about the first "C," Competence. You spend a great deal of time working on your clinical skills, reading about new developments and tools in dentistry, and learning new techniques for improving your patients' oral health care.

To become a Great Communicator, you will need to hone your skills on Caring, Compassion, and Concern.

Start by spending the first few minutes of each appointment chatting with your patient about his or her life. This is just as simple as it sounds. You will be amazed at how appreciative and talkative most of your patients will be once you show an interest in them as people.

When you have learned something about your patient, write it down in their file so that you can easily remember the information the next time he or she is in your office. After a short while, you will know about your patient's hobbies, occasions, celebrations, and accomplishments.

Every time your patient returns to your office, you can pick the conversation back up again in a very natural way that will put your patient at ease.

Rather than saying, "You look nice today," say, "You brighten up the whole room with that wonderful yellow sweater."

Giving real compliments to your patients will attract their attention and create a positive atmosphere.

It is also important that you know your patient's name and use it often in conversation.

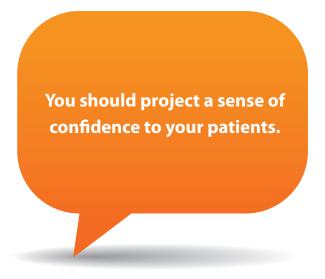
Your patients will also be delighted if you pay them a **compliment** as soon as you see them. Look for something that is sincerely impressive to mention and be specific.

It has been said that everyone's favorite word is their own name.

Think how much easier it is for you to recognize your name being spoken from across a noisy room than nearly any other word. Just by using their name, your patients will sense that you care and are concerned about them.

The last **"C," Confidence**, should be easy for dentists but they often feel uncomfortable with patients.

With all of the work and the commitment you put into becoming a competent doctor.

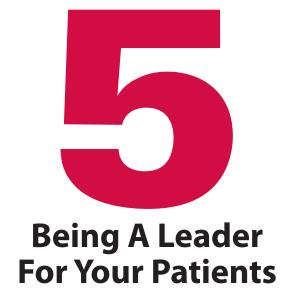


Before you enter the operatory, take a deep breath and present yourself with a relaxed appearance.

Also, maintain eye contact when talking with patients.

This displays the honesty and self-assuredness that patients want to see in you.





No matter what jobs, income, or education your patients have, they look up to you as a leader in your field. Whether your patient is a truck driver or a heart surgeon, that person is looking at you as their dental expert and wants to know what your recommendations are. Your patients need you to let them know what they should do to improve their oral health care and why they should do it.

Around the world, dentists sometimes hesitate to be leaders for their patients. Last year, I was in Hong Kong speaking to a group of dentists and one told me that he worried that if he assertively instructed and advised his patients about his recommendations for their oral health care, he would be telling patients "things they already know" or that he would be seen as "pushy" or a "salesperson." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Your patients are paying for the benefit of your expertise, which needs to be clear and to the point. Here is an example of what to do and what not to do when trying to be a leader for your patients. When a patient asks about making their teeth whiter, you **should not say:** 

"There are so many options out there for you to make your teeth whiter. Whitening kits are available at the drugstore, online, or from my practice. Some treatment works faster than others; some are more expensive than others. And you need to know that whitening can make your teeth and gums more sensitive right after treatment and eventually your teeth will be discolored again. So, you'll have to think about all of that."

All of that is true but it is not what patients want to know. They want to know what *you* think about whitening, what *you* recommend, and *why* they should use whitening. **You should say:** 

"Many of my patients are interested in whitening because it makes them feel much more confident about their smile and their overall appearance. I recommend that you start with an effective and economical whitening system. I have a Crest Whitestrips package that you can take home with you along with special Crest toothpaste that helps with sensitivity.

Would you like to start with that?"

There was no selling or pushing in that second statement about whitening. It was just simple, straightforward information and an example of how you can be a leader for your patients. As you can see, being a leader for your patient also means that you can mention a brand name -- as long as you *truly believe* that it is the best product for your patient.

It is important that you actually show your patients which products you recommend and tell them how they should be used. Otherwise, they will probably forget your recommendation or misunderstand how to use it. We want these patients to improve their oral health and their home care is critical. Of course, high-quality products such as Crest Whitestrips, Oral-B Power Brush, and the Crest Prohealth Regimen, for example, will help your practice grow as well.

Whether you are talking about whitening or implants, you always need to do 4 things to change your patients' attitudes and behaviors:



- **1. Give your opinion:** You are passionate about dentistry and your patients' oral health care. Let it show.
- 2. Make your recommendation: Patients need to be absolutely clear on what you want them to do. Tell them exactly what they need to do next.
- **3. Explain why:** Tell your patient why they should take your recommendation. Everyone wants to know how they'll benefit.
- **4. Make it brief:** You know much more than your patients need to know. It's very easy for you to overwhelm them with information that will keep them from doing anything.

## Write 4 steps that you will take to incorporate these behaviors into your pratice. 2. \_





I promise that as you put this system into practice, you will love how your patients respond. You will see the results within the first few days of making these techniques part of your routine. And the more smiles, laughter, and kind words your patients give back to you, the more you'll want to follow this system.

But there are always exceptions to every rule. Some of your patients will keep their arms folded across their chests and not allow you to break through barriers very easily. A few will actually still be hostile. How does this happen when you are saying all the right things?



For example, one of your patients may have had a bad day in a situation they could not control. Maybe their boss was angry all day and your patient took the abuse but couldn't say anything. When they arrived at your office, they finally had a chance to lash out at someone in frustration. You should not let these few patients throw you off your path to becoming a Great Communicator.

I will show you how to manage even the most difficult patients.

Being more thoughtful about how you communicate with patients is especially important with angry or upset patients. You need to approach a situation with an emotional patient with the same calm outlook that you do when diagnosing and treating a patient's clinical needs. The key to clinical success or communication success is in having a system you can rely on.



## The 4 Point System for Dealing with Emotional Patients

- **1. Listen:** Don't jump in right away by responding or asking questions. Just give your patient a chance to explain and vent their frustration.
- 2. Acknowledge the patient's feelings:
  Your patient is upset and needs someone to recognize this before anything else is said or done. Tell your patient, "I can certainly understand how you feel."
- 3. Recognize the patient's reasons for being upset: After your patient has told you why they are upset, you need to reflect that back to them. Say, "I understand why you are upset. You told me that..."
- **4. Ask what you can do:** There may not be much you can do to solve your patient's frustration. But you should find out what they think can be done and just asking shows you care.

In rare situations when your patient is extremely upset and takes it out on you, it can be difficult to keep your own emotions in check. You will be tempted to respond but this is a mistake. You will only make the patient more upset and pull yourself down, too.

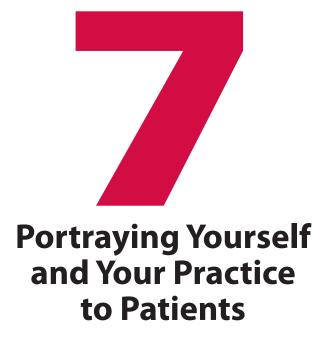
As a long-time student of martial arts, I have learned that the most effective way to deal with hostility is by avoiding conflict and, if necessary, redirecting its force. The sensei that gave me my black-belt was incredibly wise and taught me that even in situations where I was stronger than my opponent, it was best not to oppose their force directly. Instead, he taught me that I should use my opponent's force against them. After many bruises, pulled muscles, and torn ligaments, I understood exactly what my instructor meant.

When you follow this 4-point system, you will be like the martial artist who steps aside from an onrushing attacker and directs his opponent away from him. Your patient will use up their energy very quickly when they find that they are not meeting any resistance from you. Then they will be open to what you have to say. Your first thought should be as my sensei said,

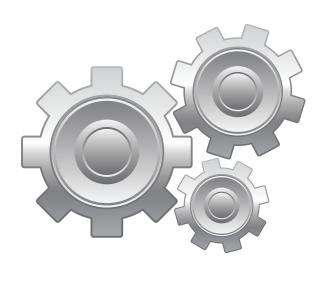
"There will be no conflict here today."

|   | Write 4 steps that you will take to incorporate the 4 Point System into your pratice. |
|---|---|
| 1 |   |
| 2 |   |
| 3 |   |
| 4 |   |
|   |   |





This is one of the most important secrets of communication that I will share with you. Before you have even had a chance to use any of the other parts of your new communication system, you will have already spoken to your patients. Not literally, of course, since you've never spoken a word to each other. But you will have sent a message to your patients through your physical appearance and that of your practice.



My grandfather and father both strongly believed that their personal and practice appearance was the foundation of their communication with their dental patients. On my first day as a dentist in my father's practice, he told me, "How you and your practice look speaks to your patients in pictures instead of words." My father and grandfather instilled in me a respect for the image that I wanted to portray to the patients who did not know me yet and those that had put their trust in me.

For my grandfather, father, and me, it was important that we always wore a tie in the dental practice. We wanted to let patients know that we were professionals and that we took pride in our appearance. Wearing a tie may seem like a small thing, but it is one of many details that will say very important things about you and your practice to patients. Your clothing, shoes, grooming, and posture all help patients understand what you are saying "in pictures instead of words."

Your office itself speaks to customers and you want to be sure it is sending the right message. First impressions stick in people's minds and your office is the first thing that you will be communicating to patients.

When your patient steps through the doorway of your practice, what is your office "saying" to them?

Is it saying, "Welcome to my practice which is a comfortable place where you will be treated with care and respect?" Or is it saying, "Sit down and I'll be with you when I have time?"

The next time you are in your practice, I would like you to walk outside and imagine that you are escorting a patient that has never been to the practice before. Picture yourself standing beside the President of the United States who has decided that he wants you to be his personal dentist.

With your notebook and pen in hand, step into the practice and notice every detail of what you see as if you are with the President.

Are you happy for the President to see the paint on the walls, the condition of your chairs, and the quality of your lighting? Take notes on anything that you think should be improved for the President and make those changes right away. You never know when he might walk into your practice!

## **NOTES**



## CONCLUSION

Once again, thank you for allowing me to help you reach your true potential by sharing my systems for communicating with patients. I hope that you will commit to using this booklet as your guide to communicating better with your patients every day for the next 90 days. When you do this, you will learn my system completely and become more effective at helping patients improve their oral health care than ever before.

Once you've become a

"Great Communicator,"

you and your patients will
be much healthier and happier!
I wish you the best in your

career and your life.

| 7 Secrets to Communicating with Dental Patients |
|---|