



Tips to Improve Leadership and Communication Skills

Building trust, engagement, and authenticity in interactions with lab staff

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Lab managers have a wide range of responsibilities, many of which involve improving their own leadership and communication skills. Debra Alford, the owner and CEO of Standup Coaching LLC, is a business leadership strategist, certified professional coach, communication strategist, and international best-selling author. Her most recent book, *Sit Down and Shut up: Finding your Voice in an Insensitive World*, is intended to help people find their purpose, destiny, and authentic voice. These are all important actions for lab managers. Finding our own purpose and using our own authentic voice helps us generate trust and more positive work relationships with staff. In addition, lab managers can greatly accelerate the development and performance of lab staff by guiding them to identify their purpose and voice.

Here, Debra shares insights on how lab managers can improve their [leadership skill](#) and realize their goals.

Q: What tips do you have for new leaders?

A: Start by leading with a servant's heart looking for ways to serve those you lead. Be open and teachable using the Golden Rule. Serving your staff, management, and your customers in the same manner in which you want to be treated. Here are three actions new leaders would benefit from:

1. Develop your personal mission statement. A mission statement is a road map for why you do what you do. It helps you to focus and make the right decisions based on your mission. I like to say a mission statement is like having a personal accountability partner. It briefly outlines your purpose, goals, and values for doing business and guides you as you lead your staff. Ask yourself, "whom do I serve, what do we do, and why do we do what we do?" Once defined, it will provide your staff with a clear direction they can support.
2. Develop and [live your core values](#). Regardless of any situation you may encounter, let your core values be your guiding light. To be effective, core values must be clearly defined and demonstrated through your leadership. Decide together the most important values you and your staff will live by for synergy and the highest performance. Make them a part of your culture guiding interactions with staff, management, and customers. Let your core values show who you and your staff have become.
3. Develop and execute your vision statement to include your staff. A vision statement is a declaration of where you and your staff want to go and how you will get to that goal. Ask your staff for input and ideas that includes short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. Define how it will change your current culture to reflect your goals.

Q: How can you be authentic while still protecting confidential information?

A: To be authentic and honest with your staff, take the initiative to explain that there will be times that proprietary or confidential information cannot be openly discussed.

Remaining honest and reflecting on your organization's core values is always the best policy and shows respect for each staff member. Be consistent, be your best, based on those values.

Q: What tips can you share on being more positive in communication with staff?

A: We all communicate, but a better question might be how do we connect? Just because we have voiced something doesn't mean a connection has been made. Words are often just sounds. Learn to connect with your staff by identifying with and relating to them in a manner that increases your influence. Take the time to lean in and ask good questions, gather information, or offer suggestions to show you are listening.

Value them as individuals, not just staff. Recognize their talents and show value beyond the position they were hired to perform. Be open to learning from your staff. Become transparent, remembering you don't have all the answers. As the leader, enable your staff's talents, abilities, and creativity. Purpose powers passion, define their purpose within their position.

Q: How can lab managers choose a communication style that best represents their values?

A: First, understand the five most common communication styles: passive, aggressive, submissive, manipulative, and assertive. Also remember communication includes verbal, non-verbal, and visual content. I find an assertive style communicates best when leading staff and shows confidence, but it should never be overpowering! This style takes into consideration the needs of others, their expectations, thoughts, ideas, creativity, and their value, giving them a voice to be heard.

Q: How can lab managers recognize that building a "family" at work doesn't appeal to everyone, especially staff from dysfunctional families?

A: Great question! Statics show that approximately 80-85 percent of people come from a dysfunctional home. This is exactly what my book, *Sit Down & Shut Up: Finding Your Voice In An Insensitive World*, talks about. That doesn't mean that people don't want to

connect; rather, they need a safe place so that they can do so with the least amount of conflict. It's helpful for many people to refer to the office culture as a team rather than family. Regardless of what you call it, show value, respect, ask good questions, honor, be kind, show integrity and compassion for their strengths and passions, while keeping favoritism at bay. Show them their worth by identifying what they excel at outside of their job title.

Q: Do you have any tips to improve listening skills?

A: Here are my top five active listening tips:

1. Lean in.
2. Ask good questions to get information.
3. Stay focused.
4. Show value. Nod your head showing interest.
5. Add value by offering suggestions, as appropriate.

Q: How can lab managers encourage better healthy debate?

A: Debating is not about a winner or loser. It is an opportunity to share creative ideas within a group setting. Present your best ideas and facts with respect for everyone. Be open to learn what you may not have thought about. Always keeping in mind your mission statement, core values, and vision statement. They should represent how you conduct yourself in any situation.