S
tewart Stonewall, MD, a star surgeon, stormed into the OR dressing room, threw his surgical cap and mask in the general direction of the trash container, and sputtered, “Dammit! I told them I’d need a resident to help with that case, but no! Dominie said they all had more important things to do. She’s sure Miss High-and-Mighty since they made her residency director. I’m going to go tell Masters a thing or two right now.” Still wearing his scrubs, he headed straight for the office of the hospital’s CEO.

“Hi, sweetie,” he said to the CEO’s receptionist, “I need to talk to Freddy boy, if he’s not too busy counting profits to listen to one of the guys who’s keeping this place afloat.”

“Mr. Masters is in a meeting,” she replied coolly, “but I’ll tell him you’re here.” She picked up the telephone and announced the surgeon’s presence.

The CEO was doing paperwork that could have waited, but he chose not to see Dr. Stonewall. For years, he had kept his composure in the face of the surgeon’s repeated undiplomatic reminders of how important a busy operating suite was to the hospital’s bottom line. Now, with surgeons in oversupply and the surgical facility downsized, he no longer felt obliged to be deferential; there being no bond of mutual respect between them, he saw no reason to listen to Dr. Stonewall at all.

The moral of the story

The story is apocryphal, of course, but for many of us Dr. Stonewall is an all-too-familiar character. His errors are obvious and plenty, and we might even be tempted to think that, as family physicians, we are so people oriented we could never make such mistakes. However, now that family physicians again find themselves moving more and more into contractual and employee relationships with hospitals and other large organizations, understanding and practicing effective interpersonal and communication skills has become crucial to professional success. The age of the lone wolf physician is gone, and trying to do things the old way is an exercise in futility. Success in today’s medical arena demands that we work as harmoniously as possible with everyone. Dr. Stonewall, like many physicians today, would do well to consider the following tips for getting along and communicating well within an organization:

**Learn to negotiate.** Starting an argument will never be as effective as negotiating, even if you dislike a particular individual or do not approve of the way the organization is operating. In the face of disagreement, ask yourself whether you’re looking for a fight or truly seeking constructive solutions. The strategies will be different—as will the outcomes. If you really are looking for a fight, don’t expect to find solutions as well. Problem-solving in modern institutions must start with common, or at least compatible objectives. Try to understand the problem from the perspective of the other players. Making demands or giving orders to professionals is often counterproductive. It’s much more effective to negotiate actions that make sense to all parties and that will be pursued willingly. Pick your battles; some issues are not important enough to justify the cost in terms of personal grief and expenditure of political capital. And never make an enemy needlessly. Don’t break any more eggs than your omelet requires.

**Go to the right source.** One major problem within organizations is that people often address their problems to the wrong person. Sometimes, we ignore the chain of command, going to someone’s supervisor when we should have worked it out with the person most directly involved. Or we tell the whole office about our trouble with so-and-so but never try to work things out directly with that person. At other times, we shoot too low, asking for a decision from someone who is not in a position to make it. Going to the wrong source wastes everyone’s time and often creates ill feelings.

When you find that you cannot solve a problem on your
own, ask yourself, “Who needs to know? Who can make
the decision?” Go to that person first. Remember that the
right source for a given problem might not be the person
with the most authority. The individual with the answers
you need may in fact be a clerk, a secretary, or a nurse.

Focus on the individual. People at all levels want to
be known and respected. Use their names. Listen to them.
Say thank you. Build up people publicly. When you must
criticize, do so privately. Assess the people you work with:
their personal strengths and weaknesses, mindset, intellec-
tual horizons, ego needs, ambitions, anxieties, trust-
worthiness, ability to trust, prejudices, and actual and
perceived power. Especially when it comes time to negoti-
tiate, you will want to understand what the other person’s
real needs are and what is motivating him or her.

In managing others, a major challenge can be to find
ways to get extraordinary performance out of ordinary
people. This may involve personal coaching, sending people out for training, restructuring
the work, or reassigning individuals to posi-
tions that best use their strong points, whatever
those may be. Getting rid of non-performers
becomes more difficult as organizations grow
in size, and it’s often wiser to help people suc-
cceed than to try to dismiss them.

One additional point: If two people in succession fail
in a position, look for the problem in the job itself,
rather than the individuals assigned to fill it.

Don’t forget yourself. While we’re on the subject of
looking at people’s characters, why not take a good, long
look at your own? You need to develop strengths that will
help you function effectively in an organization: reliability,
respect for others, the ability to keep your mouth closed,
patience, perseverance, loyalty to the institution and its
leadership, and the ability to keep cool under pressure.

Successful people are trained – or learn through experi-
ence – to be very selective in letting their feelings show. If
you do something that gives offense, however uninten-
tionally, the other party may conceal the hurt for now but
find a way to get revenge later. This puts a premium on
two skills: not giving offense in the first place and being
able to detect subtle clues that it has happened in order to
defuse the situation. Conversely, learn to keep your own
feelings in check. Don’t return anger for anger. Give

Understanding and practicing effective interpersonal and communication skills
has become crucial to professional success.

priority to understanding the reasons for the other per-
son’s actions, and also to resolving the issue in ways that
minimize pain at the present time and open the way to
better interaction in the future.

Be constructive and useful. The boss wants solu-
tions, not problems. When you must present a problem,
try to offer two or three possible solutions. And don’t try
to frighten or intimidate the boss when you present your
ideas. Make it easy for others to support you.

Being useful to the institution is a great way to build
job security, whatever that means today. One part of
this is learning to understand the organization’s vision,
missions, problems, and external pressures. In other words,
look at the big picture, not just your small corner of it.
Ask, “How did we get where we are? Where do we need
to go? How will the future be different?” At the same time,
don’t get lost in retrospection and planning. Explore your

About the Author
Dr. Gillette is a retired family physician and teacher of family
medicine in Poland, Ohio, and a former member of the Family
Practice Management Board of Editors. Author disclosure: no
relevant financial affiliations disclosed.

Send comments to fpmedit@aafp.org.

Editor’s note: To enrich our online archive with some partic-
ularly useful “pre-web” articles, we are publishing updated
versions of them. This article first appeared in 1997.

Article Web Address: http://www.aafp.org/fpm/2012/0100/p18.html