

## Defect-Free Requests

By Dorothy (Dolly) Bellhouse

In a customer-supplier relationship, each party has responsibilities. The customer is responsible for making a defect-free request to a specified supplier and the supplier is responsible for delivering a defect-free product or service in the right amount at the right time. In my work, we call this a specified connection. Sounds easy, doesn't it?

Yet, missed connections happen all the time. Let's look at some real life examples.

My husband and I were traveling over New Year's. The day we were checking out of our motel, my husband decided to go downstairs for breakfast in the self-serve area. He kindly asked if I would like anything before the breakfast area closed. I asked for a bagel and cream cheese. He left and I resumed packing, while watching the Tournament of Roses parade on TV. I finished packing, but my husband had not yet returned with my bagel. So, I just waited and watched the parade, assuming he would come back when he finished eating. Meanwhile, he was in the breakfast area waiting for me. He had gotten a bagel and cream cheese and placed it at the table so it would be ready when I came down. He then went on to eat his breakfast, assuming I would be down shortly. He decided to have a second cup of coffee while he waited. Finally, he brought the bagel upstairs and wondered what was taking so long. Meanwhile, I had been wondering what was taking him so long!

This was clearly a defective connection! We both assumed that we knew what my request had been. I assumed he knew to bring the bagel back to the room, so I could eat it on the fly. He assumed he would secure a bagel before the breakfast area closed and I would be down shortly.

As a customer, assuming that your supplier knows exactly where, when and how much you need can be a problem. When I was a senior manager, I would often make requests for information from colleagues "as soon as possible." I assumed they knew what that meant. But does "as soon as possible" mean within 24 hours? Or does it mean drop everything and work on

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## Defect-Free Requests (Continued...)

this now? In all fairness, either interpretation is valid. Given that even my own "ASAP" means different things at different times, how were my colleague "suppliers" to know? They may have exceeded my expectations by getting me the information today, when tomorrow would have been fine. I would certainly have been appreciative of their effort, but I am certain I wouldn't have understood what havoc I might have wrought. Had they delayed other customer requests to respond to mine just because I was a senior manager?

I would also provide my office phone number, my pager number, sometimes even my home phone number (this was for the "drop everything" requests!), and of course, my e-mail address, thinking I was making it easy for my supplier to reach me with any questions and the requested information. However, what was a supplier to do? Leave a message at my office and home numbers, then page me while sending an e-mail? This tactic also created more work for me (the customer). If I did not get paged, I would check my office voicemail. If there was no message, I would check my home voicemail; only to find the answer in my e-mail when I dialed up remotely!

To make matters worse, I would make the request for the same information to several suppliers just in case someone was out at a meeting or had the day off or I wasn't exactly sure who could get the information I needed. So, then I had multiple colleagues scurrying around, duplicating work efforts, trying to meet my request-which was certainly unspecified as to timing and response!

Connections should be clearly specified as to who, what, when and where. When I was making the "ASAP" request, I should have been clear about the type of information I needed (WHAT) and made the request to only one person (WHO). I should have specified what "ASAP" meant exactly (WHEN) and picked one way (office phone, home phone, pager or e-mail) for them to get back to me (HOW). Making my request defect-free in this manner would have saved lots of people time and anxiety, including mine!

Often, when groups (work teams, families) work together for a long time, it is easy to make assumptions on both the customer and the supplier sides. Think about your connections both at work and at home. When you are the customer, are your requests defect-free? How often do you assume folks will know what you mean? As a supplier, are you sure you know what your customer needs, when and how they need it? Or do you assume it will be like the last time you did it or that it will be how another customer wanted it?

As a customer, try specifying your requests. When you are a supplier, you can help your customer specify their requests by asking the who, what, when and how questions. I guarantee you'll see a difference in your connections.

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## Lessons From the Actors Studio

By Paula Butterfield, PhD, PCC

Stick with me for a moment while I tell a tale of greatness. I'm an avid fan of *Inside the Actors Studio*, a cable program in which James Lipton, dean of New York's Actors Studio, interviews a famous actor or director each week. What I love about it is the passion with which these artists talk about their craft and the courage with which they tackle their fears. Yes they are famous, but they are still mortals, wrestling with the same insecurities as the rest of us. And the lessons they offer give a glimpse of the greatness in each of us that lies just beyond our own self-doubt.

Lipton recently interviewed Dustin Hoffman, who was talking about the difficulty of "finding the character" of savant Raymond Babbitt in the movie *Rainman* with Tom Cruise [who plays Raymond's brother Charlie]. Hoffman had done his research, but when filming began, he still hadn't "found" the character.

They did three takes of an early scene, followed by some improvisation. At day's end, director Barry Levinson called Hoffman over to see the improv takes. Levinson was laughing. Hoffman told Lipton he was convinced he'd blown it. "I'm ready to turn in my resignation," he said. Then he viewed the takes. Every time Charlie said something, Raymond responded with a terse "Yeah!" Hoffman had no idea what else to say, so he went with his gut reaction.

"And that was it, that was the place!" he exclaimed. He'd found the character in an improvised moment.

"A take," he told Lipton, "is the actor's time to fail" Every art has a failure quotient and for Hoffman, having to film without finding the character put him on the verge of failing. But, he added, "Failing isn't the worst. ...Putting something out there that's safe, so you don't get hurt, or because it worked before, that's a sin. You've failed yourself. Put something out there that's 'Oooh, oooh, in that place with somebody.' That's worth everything." When he let go of the worrying and put something out there that was 'oooh, oooh, in that place' with the other character, it worked brilliantly.

Yes, he was talking about film, but his words apply equally well to leadership. It is a performing art. When women leaders put something out there that's safe so we won't get hurt or because it worked before, we are failing ourselves.

Our greatest challenge, as any artist knows, is learning to honor our own strengths. Many of us have spent so much time trying to adapt to the linear logic of men's hierarchies that we don't even recognize our natural strengths, much less take them out in public. We understand the world of relationships, but we form and stay in small, intimate circles

rather than develop broad networks of connection.

We understand the power of emotion, but we internalize the messages of childhood so well that most of us still keep a low profile, are seen rather than heard, defer to others and keep our passion and enthusiasm reined in. We understand wholeness and completeness, but we direct it at the micro level by making multitasking and managing details an art form, instead of building webs of connection at the macro level and helping people translate potential into high performance.

For me, it is reassuring to hear masterful artists like Dustin Hoffman confess to the small voice of insignificance and uncertainty; and it is inspiring to hear how he and other artists choose to step through their fear rather than back away from it. Melanie Griffith told Lipton that she's so scared every time she starts a new movie, she can barely recall her own name. Tom Hanks admitted that every time he steps onto a new set, he fears that he'll be discovered as an imposter. Yet he continues to step onto new sets ... and deliver award-winning performances.

Every day we have the choice to play small or to put something out there from the core of our own knowing. As women, we bring valuable strengths to our organizations. Our nurturing nature, our capacity to form and sustain strong relationships and networks, our desire to help others develop are precisely what today's healthcare organizations need.

So the next time your gut suggests a courageous course of action and your head overrules it in order to play safe, think like an actor. Trust your gut. Broaden those circles of connection. Engage people emotionally by inviting them to bring all of who and how they are to what they do. Speak up when you witness decisions or actions that run counter to patient-centered care. In short, don't fail yourself. Step through the doubt and put something out there that's "oooh, oooh, in that place" with someone. Who knows? It may lead straight to your own greatness.

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## Computer Software Schedules Nurses

A hospital system in Missouri will soon be scheduling nurses at its eight hospitals using a computer software program. The software will determine how many nurses are needed in each unit and will fill extra shifts from a dedicated pool of nurses.

SSM Health Care-St. Louis spends about \$7 million a year on outside staffing agencies, and its nurse managers spend as much as 60 percent of their time on staffing issues. SSM expects to reduce both dollars and time spent.

Using computer software to help schedule staff is becoming more common, particularly as the supply of nurses tightens. But Patricia Rowell, a senior policy fellow at the American Nurses Association, said the software programs vary greatly in their ability to predict staffing needs.

SSM is using a program developed by Avantas in Omaha, Nebraska. The software uses mathematical equations to evaluate about a dozen factors to predict how many nurses will be needed in each unit for each shift. It also predicts about how many might call in unable to work. The software doesn't just look at the number of patients or the level of care they need. It also examines historical data, such as how many patients visited the hospital each day in previous years and when flu outbreaks typically strike. The software even knows if there's a big local sporting event or school vacation that could prompt more nurses to take off work.

As elements of the equation change - for example, more or sicker patients than usual are admitted - the software responds. If additional nurses are needed at the last minute, they will be pulled automatically from its

nursing pool. The software then creates models that can be viewed by nurse managers as they schedule their staffs. The nurse managers set the final staffing levels, but use the models as a guide.

According to SSM vice president for human resources services, the new system should "significantly improve" how staffing needs are forecast, reducing last-minute, costly efforts to secure nurses.

Under the new system, SSM nurses will have several employment options. They can work as most nurses do now, typically treating patients in the same units. SSM nurses looking for less predictable work can sign up for available shifts on a Web site. Those nurses will be paid based on how tough the shift is to fill. Other nurses can leave SSM and join the nursing pool, dedicated solely to SSM in St. Louis. They could then be sent out at a moment's notice, much as if they worked for a temporary nurse staffing service.

In the past, nurse scheduling at SSM has been mostly guesswork and it's all been on paper, according to the vice president for human resources. SSM expects it will take two years to fully implement the new system.

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