

## Review

# Building Effective Communication Skills for High-Stress Hospital Settings

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### Abstract

Effective communication in critical care settings is paramount for ensuring patient safety and facilitating team collaboration during high-stakes situations. However, numerous barriers impede clear and effective communication, including hierarchical dynamics, cultural and linguistic differences, fatigue, and the complexities of integrating technology. Hierarchies within healthcare systems often discourage open dialogue, particularly among junior staff who may hesitate to voice concerns. This dynamic can delay critical interventions or result in errors. Similarly, cultural diversity within multidisciplinary teams can lead to misunderstandings stemming from differences in communication styles and norms, further complicating interactions in high-pressure environments. Structured communication frameworks such as Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation (SBAR) standardize information exchange, ensuring clarity and reducing cognitive load during emergencies. Additionally, cultural competence training programs equip healthcare professionals with the skills to navigate linguistic and cultural challenges effectively, fostering greater cohesion within diverse teams. While technology enhances communication by enabling rapid information sharing, its misuse or failure can disrupt workflows, emphasizing the need for proper training and contingency planning. Psychological safety within teams has proven instrumental in enabling open and transparent communication. Interprofessional education and collaborative exercises promote mutual understanding and align goals across diverse professional roles. Addressing physical and environmental distractions, such as noise and interruptions in critical care units, further enhances communication effectiveness. Combining these strategies mitigates barriers, ensuring better teamwork, improved decision-making, and optimal patient outcomes in critical care settings.

**Keywords:** *Critical care communication, psychological safety, SBAR framework, cultural competence, interprofessional collaboration*

**Introduction**

High-stress hospital settings are characterized by complex dynamics and the constant pressure of delivering timely, life-saving care. Effective communication among healthcare professionals is pivotal in ensuring that patient outcomes are optimized, particularly in emergencies where rapid decision-making and collaborative action are required. Communication breakdowns can result in serious consequences, including medical errors, patient harm, and caregiver burnout, underscoring the need for robust communication strategies (1).

The healthcare environment is inherently hierarchical, and this structure often poses challenges to open communication. Traditional hierarchies can hinder the free flow of information, especially when junior staff members feel reluctant to question senior colleagues. Studies have highlighted that fostering a culture of open dialogue and psychological safety significantly enhances teamwork and minimizes errors (2). Moreover, the high-stress nature of hospital environments, particularly in critical care units and emergency rooms, exacerbates communication challenges. Factors such as fatigue, emotional stress, and multitasking further complicate the ability to convey and interpret information accurately (3). Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a critical component in managing communication in high-stress situations. EI encompasses the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate emotions, both one's own and others. Healthcare providers with high EI are better equipped to navigate interpersonal challenges, de-escalate conflicts, and foster a collaborative atmosphere. Evidence suggests that training programs focused on enhancing EI leads to improved communication and teamwork, ultimately resulting in better patient care (4).

Training interventions have also shown promise in mitigating communication barriers in high-stress settings. Simulation-based training, role-playing scenarios, and the use of standardized communication frameworks such as Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation (SBAR) are examples of evidence-based

approaches that prepare healthcare professionals to manage real-life stressors effectively. These tools are particularly effective in aligning multidisciplinary teams, ensuring clarity, and promoting a shared understanding of goals and responsibilities during emergencies (3, 4). Another important consideration is the integration of technology to facilitate communication. Digital tools, including telemedicine platforms and real-time electronic health records, have revolutionized how information is shared among care teams. However, reliance on technology also requires continuous education and adaptation to prevent potential misuse or miscommunication (1). The stakes in high-stress hospital settings demand a concerted effort to build and maintain effective communication skills. This review aims to discuss the importance of building effective communication skills in high hospital settings.

**Review**

Effective communication in high-stress hospital environments is crucial for maintaining patient safety and fostering teamwork. A key factor in achieving this is the development of structured communication protocols. Evidence shows that standardized frameworks such as SBAR significantly enhance clarity and reduce misinterpretations during critical interactions (5). These frameworks ensure that all team members, regardless of hierarchy, are aligned in understanding patient needs and intervention priorities, particularly in high-pressure situations.

Equally important is the role of EI in mitigating interpersonal conflicts and facilitating collaboration among diverse healthcare teams. High EI among healthcare professionals has been linked to improved teamwork, reduced stress levels, and enhanced decision-making in emergencies (6). Incorporating EI training into professional development programs has shown to improve not only individual competencies but also overall team performance, as individuals become more adept at managing stress and fostering supportive communication dynamics. These strategies emphasize that effective communication is not

merely a technical skill but also a reflection of the emotional and psychological readiness of healthcare teams. By integrating both structural and interpersonal approaches, hospitals can create resilient systems capable of navigating the complexities of high-stress scenarios.

### ***Strategies for Enhancing Interpersonal Communication in High-Stress Environments***

Interpersonal communication in high-stress environments demands more than technical proficiency; it requires an adaptive, multidimensional approach that fosters collaboration, clarity, and trust. The stakes in hospital settings, particularly during emergencies, make it critical for teams to operate seamlessly. To address these challenges, institutions are increasingly turning to evidence-based strategies that enhance interpersonal communication and improve team cohesion. Training programs tailored to healthcare settings have proven effective in addressing communication gaps. Simulated clinical scenarios offer one of the most impactful methods for building these skills. By immersing participants in realistic, high-pressure situations, simulations provide a safe environment for individuals to practice critical communication techniques and receive constructive feedback (7, 8). These exercises are designed to mimic real-world dynamics, including the need for rapid decision-making and multitasking, while emphasizing clear and concise exchanges of information. Repeated exposure to such scenarios fosters muscle memory, ensuring that individuals can execute effective communication practices instinctively under pressure.

Technological tools are another cornerstone of modern communication strategies. The integration of electronic health records and secure, real-time communication platforms has streamlined the sharing of vital information. Research underscores the importance of user-friendly digital systems in reducing delays and improving coordination among multidisciplinary teams (9). These tools enable healthcare providers to access patient data, treatment plans, and progress notes seamlessly, minimizing the risks associated with fragmented or

incomplete information. Training programs that teach staff how to utilize these technologies effectively are critical in maximizing their potential and avoiding miscommunication.

The establishment of a psychologically safe environment is a crucial factor in enhancing interpersonal communication. Psychological safety is defined as the shared belief among team members that they can voice concerns, ask questions, and offer suggestions without fear of ridicule or reprisal. In healthcare, where hierarchical structures often dominate, fostering such an atmosphere can break down barriers to open dialogue. Teams that prioritize psychological safety report fewer communication-related errors and greater adaptability during high-stress situations (10). Leaders play an instrumental role in creating this environment by modeling inclusive behaviors, soliciting input from all team members, and addressing conflicts constructively.

Nonverbal communication is another dimension that significantly influences team dynamics. Elements such as body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice often convey more than spoken words. Awareness of these cues can prevent misunderstandings and strengthen trust among team members. For instance, maintaining eye contact during critical discussions or displaying open body posture can signal attentiveness and mutual respect, which are essential for effective collaboration. Training programs that emphasize the importance of nonverbal communication have been shown to enhance relational dynamics and contribute to a cohesive team environment (11). This attention to nonverbal elements ensures that messages are not only delivered but also received with clarity and empathy.

Interdisciplinary team-building exercises also play a pivotal role in strengthening communication skills. These initiatives aim to dismantle silos and encourage collaboration across different specialties. Activities that require collective problem-solving foster a deeper understanding of each team member's role and responsibilities. As individuals gain insight into the challenges faced by their

colleagues, they develop a greater appreciation for the importance of effective communication in achieving shared goals. Studies have demonstrated that teams that engage in regular collaborative exercises exhibit greater resilience and efficiency during high-stakes situations (11).

Integrating EI into communication strategies is indispensable as it involves the ability to recognize and regulate one's own emotions while empathizing with others. High levels of EI are associated with improved conflict resolution, enhanced interpersonal relationships, and a greater capacity to handle stress. Training programs focused on EI equip healthcare professionals with the skills to navigate emotionally charged situations, such as delivering bad news or mediating team conflicts. These programs contribute to a culture of mutual respect and understanding, reinforcing the foundation of effective communication. By combining structured training, technological advancements, psychological safety, and emotional intelligence, healthcare teams can navigate the complexities of high-stress environments with greater competence and confidence. These strategies not only enhance interpersonal communication but also ensure that patient care remains the top priority, even under the most challenging circumstances.

### ***The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Effective Team Collaboration***

In high-stress and multidisciplinary environments such as hospitals, EI significantly influences the quality of team collaboration and overall performance. At its core, EI enhances interpersonal dynamics by fostering recognition, understanding, and regulation of emotions, which is crucial for effective communication and decision-making in group settings. Research shows that healthcare teams with higher levels of EI consistently exhibit greater adaptability and resilience, leading to improved patient outcomes and reduced interpersonal conflicts (12).

Self-awareness forms the foundation of EI in collaborative settings, empowering individuals to identify their emotional responses and regulate them

appropriately. This competency is especially critical for team leaders, as their ability to maintain composure under pressure directly impacts the group's emotional climate. Leaders with high self-awareness are more likely to create a stable and reassuring presence during emergencies, reducing anxiety and maintaining focus among team members. For instance, studies have demonstrated that teams guided by leaders with strong EI are better able to navigate high-stakes scenarios, improving the overall efficacy of interventions (13). Beyond self-awareness, social awareness enables team members to empathize with and respond effectively to the emotions and needs of others. This skill facilitates the accurate interpretation of nonverbal cues, such as body language or tone of voice, which is essential in healthcare environments where verbal communication may be limited due to time constraints or critical situations. For example, a subtle expression of hesitation during a surgical procedure might signal uncertainty or a lack of clarity regarding a task. A socially aware team member can address these cues proactively, preventing potential errors and ensuring the smooth flow of operations (14). This heightened sensitivity to the emotional states of others builds trust and fosters a collaborative spirit, even under intense pressure.

Relationship management, another critical component of EI, plays an instrumental role in maintaining harmony within diverse and interprofessional teams. Effective relationship management involves not only resolving conflicts but also nurturing positive interactions that enhance team cohesion. Studies have highlighted that healthcare teams with strong relationship management skills are more adept at integrating the perspectives of various specialties, facilitating consensus-building during critical decisions. In such environments, emotional intelligence helps mitigate the friction that can arise from differing opinions, fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity (15).

Empathy, a hallmark of EI, further strengthens collaborative efforts by promoting an atmosphere of mutual respect and psychological safety. Empathy



allows team members to understand and validate the emotions of their colleagues, creating a supportive environment where individuals feel valued and heard. In high-stress scenarios, such as trauma response or intensive care unit operations, empathetic interactions can defuse tension and reinforce a sense of solidarity. This shared understanding not only enhances communication but also sustains team performance over extended periods of stress. For instance, empathetic leaders often encourage their teams to express concerns or doubts freely, leading to a more open and transparent communication process (12). Additionally, EI contributes to effective conflict resolution, which is vital in healthcare teams composed of individuals with diverse expertise and professional backgrounds. Conflicts in such settings often stem from differences in priorities, communication styles, or resource allocation. High EI equips team members with the skills to address these issues constructively, focusing on shared goals rather than personal disagreements. By facilitating open dialogue and encouraging collaboration, EI-driven conflict resolution strategies ensure that disputes do not escalate into disruptive conflicts but are resolved in ways that benefit the entire team and, ultimately, the patients they serve (13). The integration of emotional intelligence training into healthcare education and professional development programs has been shown to significantly enhance team performance. Workshops, simulations, and role-playing exercises that focus on EI competencies provide healthcare workers with practical tools for managing stress, fostering collaboration, and improving patient care outcomes. These training initiatives ensure that the principles of emotional intelligence are not only understood but also actively applied in real-world settings, amplifying their impact on team dynamics (15).

### ***Addressing Barriers to Clear Communication in Critical Care Scenarios***

Clear communication in critical care scenarios is an indispensable component of effective healthcare delivery, yet it is often compromised by systemic and human factors. These barriers not only impede the timely exchange of critical information but also

escalate the risk of adverse outcomes for patients. To mitigate these challenges, a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes and proactive strategies for intervention are required. One of the most pervasive barriers is the hierarchical structure of healthcare systems. In critical care units, where decisions need to be made rapidly, junior healthcare professionals may hesitate to voice concerns or offer alternative suggestions due to fears of retaliation or undermining authority. This hesitation can result in delayed interventions or unaddressed safety concerns. Research emphasizes the importance of psychological safety, a workplace environment where team members feel secure to express ideas, admit errors, and provide feedback without fear of judgment or repercussions (10, 16). Psychological safety can be cultivated through leadership approaches that prioritize inclusivity, encourage open dialogue, and normalize constructive feedback during routine and crisis interactions.

Cultural and linguistic diversity within healthcare teams further compounds communication barriers. Multinational teams often encounter misunderstandings stemming from differences in communication styles, language proficiency, and cultural norms. For instance, what may be perceived as assertive in one culture could be interpreted as aggressive in another, leading to interpersonal friction. To address this, healthcare organizations are increasingly adopting cultural competence training. These programs not only raise awareness of cultural differences but also teach practical strategies for navigating them in high-stakes environments (17). Additionally, integrating professional interpreters or language-access technologies ensures that language barriers do not undermine the delivery of care or the cohesiveness of team interactions.

Stress and fatigue, inherent to critical care environments, significantly impair effective communication. Long shifts, high patient acuity, and emotional strain can diminish a healthcare provider's ability to focus, articulate, and process complex information. Fatigue-related communication errors are well-documented, with

studies linking them to missed or misinterpreted instructions during patient handoffs or emergency procedures. Structured communication tools such as SBAR (Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation) and checklists have been shown to mitigate these risks by standardizing information exchange, reducing cognitive load, and ensuring that all essential elements of a conversation are addressed systematically (5). These tools act as cognitive aids, helping providers maintain clarity and precision even in high-pressure scenarios.

Technological advancements in healthcare offer both solutions and challenges in the realm of communication. Digital tools such as electronic health records, secure messaging platforms, and telehealth systems have revolutionized how teams share and access patient information. However, technology can also introduce complications. Over-reliance on text-based communication, for instance, often lacks the nuance and immediacy required in emergency settings, leading to misinterpretation of critical details. Furthermore, technical malfunctions such as software errors or network outages can exacerbate communication breakdowns during pivotal moments. Ensuring that staff receive adequate training on the use of communication technologies and maintaining contingency plans for system failures are essential to overcoming these barriers (9). Blending digital solutions with in-person communication remains key to achieving a balance that optimizes clarity and responsiveness. Interpersonal dynamics within multidisciplinary teams also play a critical role in shaping communication effectiveness. Differences in professional training, terminology, and priorities among nurses, physicians, and ancillary staff can create friction and misunderstandings. For example, what a nurse identifies as an urgent concern may not be immediately apparent to a physician unfamiliar with the nuances of the patient's bedside condition. Team-building exercises and interprofessional education initiatives are effective in fostering mutual understanding and trust among healthcare workers. These programs help align team members' perspectives, create shared goals, and bridge the professional silos that often hinder collaboration.

Lastly, the physical environment of critical care units can itself pose communication challenges. Noise, interruptions, and the fast-paced nature of these settings can make it difficult to convey or absorb information accurately. Environmental modifications, such as the creation of designated "quiet zones" for handovers or the strategic use of visual aids, can enhance focus and minimize distractions. Studies have also highlighted the value of simulation-based training in preparing teams to adapt their communication strategies to these chaotic environments. Simulations provide a risk-free platform to rehearse, identify, and rectify communication weaknesses in realistic scenarios. Addressing the multifaceted barriers to clear communication in critical care requires an integrated approach that combines structural, interpersonal, and technological solutions. By recognizing these barriers and implementing targeted interventions, healthcare teams can enhance their communication practices, leading to improved patient safety and outcomes

## **Conclusion**

Improving communication in critical care requires addressing systemic, interpersonal, and technological barriers through a multifaceted approach. By fostering psychological safety, enhancing cultural competence, and implementing structured tools like SBAR, teams can navigate the complexities of high-pressure environments effectively. Integrating technology thoughtfully and prioritizing interprofessional education further strengthens collaboration. These efforts collectively enhance patient safety, streamline teamwork, and ensure optimal outcomes in critical care settings.

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There is no conflict of interest.

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### ***Ethical consideration***

Non applicable.

**Data availability**

Data that support the findings of this study are embedded within the manuscript.

**Author contribution**

All authors contributed to conceptualizing, data drafting, collection and final writing of the manuscript.

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