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## Does face-to-face communication always work best?



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Mobile phones (including SMS), email, instant messaging apps, and social media platforms all provide us an easy way to communicate with co-workers and other people. While technology is associated with communication efficiency, the question is "Are we able to communicate effectively?"

Especially for hospital and health system leaders, there are certain instances when face-to-face conversations with employees are necessary. These are some interactions that healthcare leaders and HR experts say are better done in person.

**Building trust.** Electronic communications can save time, so can face-to-face meetings, particularly when trust needs to be established. It is difficult to communicate genuineness and a sense of being heard with digital communications, especially those that don't occur visually and in real time. "But even video conferences limit the remarkable capacity we humans have to sense and feel and discern the other when we are fully present to each other," says Kevin Armstrong, Chief of Staff and Executive Vice President of Mission and Values at Indiana University Health.

**Engaging mission-critical matters.** It is also difficult, if not impossible, for a leader to understand how a conversation or communication is received without being able to engage in a face-to-face conversation with employees. When the risks are high and the issue is mission-critical, according to Armstrong, taking 10 minutes in person is better than having 30 minutes exchanging texts. He says risks are minimised and benefits amplified when body language and other nonverbal cues are on full display in actual conversation.

See also [Communicating About Difficult Medical Decisions](#)

**Keeping staff motivated.** Frequent rounding keeps a leader in touch with hospital employees, particularly those on the front lines of patient care. This keeps the leadership team apprised of developing issues, large and small, and encourages discussion and action. As Bernard Klein, MD, Chief Executive of Providence Holy Cross Medical Center (Mission Hills, California) notes: "Looking someone in the eye in meaningful conversation goes a long way to nurture good relationships, grow the pride in what we do and encourage a spirit of teamwork to enhance the care of our patients, their families and one another."

**Conducting safety rounds.** Safety information is too important to share exclusively by email, as the message might not be received for hours, if not days, according to Dr. Klein. "Meeting in person in the various workplaces provides us the opportunity to identify potential hazards and remedies and to advance safe practices," he explains. At Memorial Hermann Health System (Houston), Lori Knowles, Senior Vice President and Chief Human Resources, says multidisciplinary discharge rounds allow team members from all disciplines – physicians, nurses, case managers and others – to have structured conversations daily that help ensure patients are receiving the care they need.

**Improving leadership and communication skills.** Technology plays an important role in communications and operations, but it cannot replace the face-to-face time with our team members, says Mike Thompson, Senior Executive Officer of Integrated Health Services, Florida Hospital (Orlando). The organisation has a monthly programme called "Performance Platform," where they film a message about an important topic (with plenty of background information and tips about how to relay the topic to frontline staff) and send it to the top leadership. "From there, our workgroup leaders and designated 'coaches' have in-person meetings and cascade the information to all team members. Having this in-person component is key to helping our teams build leadership and communication skills and ensures everyone receives the same message," Thompson explains.

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Image: Pixabay

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