Smile at the doctor - you may receive better care

Under most conditions, positive social interactions have beneficial implications for employee performance, say Tel Aviv University researchers

Several studies recently undertaken by The Tel Aviv University revealed that positive interactions with patients improved team performance under most conditions. Yet these generally positive effects can be neutralised or even reversed when teams are engaged in complex tasks such as a highly involved and difficult surgery.

The studies were conducted to understand how **positive social interaction affects cognitive performance** on both individual and teams in the work place.

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For the first set of studies published in *Human Relations*, the researchers examined the effects of positive interactions among 432 undergraduate students randomly assigned into teams. The task required the teams to make a series of decisions. Results showed positive comments made within the groups had an overwhelmingly constructive effect on team performance.

“Overall, team synergistic behaviour seems to be positively influenced by the types of positive interactions we studied. This is in contrast to the results of earlier findings on the effects of negative or rude utterances directed at team members which found rather devastating consequences on medical team diagnostic and procedural performance,” Prof. Peter Bamberger, one of the studies lead researchers and faculty member of TAU's Coller School of Management, told HealthManagement.org.

For the second part of this study, the researchers observed 377 surgical teams, over six months at a large , tertiary health care centre in Israel. The outcome highlighted that positive interactions in the course of a complex task can be harmful in certain situations.

“First, it suggests that there’s a time and place even for positive utterances. Those “out of place” can distract the practitioner, and ultimately harm the patient. Second, it suggests that positive utterances and the affect that they generate can generate a sense of over-confidence and complacency. This is something that we’re investigating in our current research,” Prof. Bamberger said.

For the second set of studies, published in *Pediatrics*, sought to explore whether it makes any difference if the source of positive utterances is the patient’s family or a senior colleague. The researchers observed 43 neonatal intensive care unit teams in training workshops and randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) maternal gratitude generally from a mother; (2) expert gratitude, between a physician and the teams; 3) combined maternal and expert gratitude; or (4) control, where neither positive nor negative statements were made.

The results indicated that the medical staff, were positively influenced by maternal gratitude and more sensitive towards interactions and feedback from patients' families but **collegial/professional gratitude had little effect.**

In explaining why collegial/professional gratitude had no effect Prof. Bamberger commented: “ Firstly, the manipulation may not have been strong enough; that is, the expert in their video may have been too “low key” in expressing his thanks. Secondly, it may be that participants feel that supervisory gratitude is less than sincere and more manipulative than positive. Finally, it may be that while supervisors frequently express gratitude (thus making it more routine), **gratitude from patients/patient families is more unique** and rare, and thus more attention-grabbing than salient.”

“Given that positive interactions are generally reciprocated, it might make a lot of sense for providers to initiate positive interactions. While quality care is the most important aspect of service provision, providing it with a smile and a clear message of caring may generate more positive patient reactions; reactions which, at least according to our study, seem to enhance quality of care. The bottom line here is clear, as a patient, you should be nice and express gratitude to medical practitioners," concluded Prof. Bamberger.

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