

# The Tech Leader's Tool Kit: Skills Every Pharmacy Technician Should Master

Pharmacy Technicians Enhance Patient Safety and Efficiency by Mastering Communication, Situational Awareness, and Leadership Skills

By Caitlin M. Quigley, CPhT, DPLA

State laws are expanding pharmacy technician scopes of practice, technology is reshaping workflows, and leaders are recognizing the value of highly trained, engaged technicians. But opportunity alone is not enough. This is our moment to shape the kind of pharmacy we want to work in. It should be supportive, efficient, and safe for patients and staff. Technicians are often the first line of defense in medication safety, spotting problems early and keeping care moving.

We often wait for a leadership title or an invitation to take on more, but the truth is that leadership is not a job title; it is a skill set. You can practice it right now, in any role, without waiting for permission. With the 5 skills outlined below, any technician can grow their influence, strengthen their team, and be ready when opportunity knocks.

## Skill No. 1 Communication That Connects

Speed and precision mean little if communication fails. Effective technician leaders are bridges from confusion to clarity and from problems to solutions.

In pharmacy, communication has layers. There is rapid, direct language during high-pressure moments (“STAT dose to ICU [intensive care unit] room 412, on the way now”), detailed clarity for troubleshooting (“Automated dispensing cabinet drawer 3 is jamming; lights will not engage; ticket submitted”), and the human side when coaching a teammate (“That bin was missed; let’s walk the workflow together so it does not happen again”).

Early in my systems role, the SBAR approach (situation, background, assessment, recommendation) changed how I escalated concerns.<sup>1</sup> Instead of saying, “We are out of a medication,” I would explain the situation, provide background information, make an assessment, and then recommend a solution. That format does not just share a problem; it shows you have thought through options.

For example:

- Situation: We are currently out of 500-mg metronidazole vials.
- Background: They have been on back order for 3 weeks, and increased surgical cases have accelerated use.
- Assessment: Supply is normal, but vials are stranded in low-use locations and high-use areas are stocked out.
- Recommendation: Destock low-use areas and reallocate to where demand is highest.



BIO

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**Pro tip:** Match your message to your audience. What a pharmacist needs in a rush differs from what a fellow technician needs during onboarding or what leadership needs for a decision.

**Skill No. 2****Situational Awareness**

If communication is the glue, situational awareness is the map. It is easy to be locked in your own station, but leaders keep a pulse on the whole operation: Is the intravenous room falling behind? Does the delivery run look overloaded? Are returns creeping up from a particular unit?

Situational awareness also means anticipating issues. If a courier is delayed, switch to runners and post estimated times of arrival in the unit channel. If there is a cold chain risk, relocate immediately, tag appropriately, and send a quick heads-up in the unit channel.

**Pro tip:** Start every shift with a 5-minute sweep. Scan urgent and high-priority orders and note any special handling for patients or cases. You will begin the day on offense, not defense.

**Skill No. 3****A Process Improvement Mindset**

One of the most expensive phrases in pharmacy is “That’s how we’ve always done it.” Challenging that does not mean change for its own sake. It means noticing inefficiencies, risks, and opportunities and proposing simple, testable improvements, using small tests of change when you can.<sup>2</sup> This can be as simple as moving a high-use medication to a top drawer so it can be pulled in 2 seconds, not 20, or creating a 1-page quick reference for frequently repackaged medications to reduce label errors.

When you bring ideas forward, package them in 3 parts: the current state (what is happening now), the proposed change (your suggestion), and its impact (time saved, errors prevented, or efficiency gained). Consistently framing ideas this way signals that you think beyond your own tasks. That is a hallmark of leadership.

**Pulling the Tool Kit Together**

This is not an all-or-nothing list. Start with 1 skill and practice it every shift. When that feels natural, add situational awareness, then mentorship, and so on.

You might not have a manager title yet, but by mastering these fundamentals, you will already be doing the work of one, and people notice. Tomorrow’s pharmacy is built shift by shift. With these skills, you can help lead it forward. **P**

**Skill No. 4****Mentorship and Peer Support**

Mentorship is one of the most underestimated leadership skills. Showing someone the ropes is shaping the next generation. Great mentors explain the *why*, not just the *what*. They model critical thinking and professionalism, boost confidence, and reduce turnover.

For example, if a new hire struggles with automated dispensing cabinet refills, do not just correct the steps; teach the reasoning behind periodic automatic replenishment levels, expiration checks, and drawer organization.<sup>3</sup> If a colleague wants certification or advanced training, share your path, resources, and encouragement.

**Pro tip:** Take ownership of onboarding. Volunteer as a buddy and check in after week 1, month 1, and quarter 1. Ongoing connection builds trust, and trust builds stronger teams.

**Skill No. 5****Resilience Under Pressure**

Shortages. System outages. Emergency codes. Volume spikes. Pharmacy can change in an instant. Leaders are steady, focused, and effective when things tilt sideways. Resilience is not the absence of stress; it is managing it without letting it spread.

In practice, that looks like reprioritizing on the fly when a STAT order interrupts a high-volume fill, keeping a calm tone when explaining delays to a nurse who is under pressure, or taking a breath before a tough conversation so it stays productive.

**Pro tip:** Use microresets throughout the day. Pause, breathe, rerank your next 3 tasks, and move with intention. Your composure is contagious.

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