

3 Key Elements of Effective Business Communication

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Communication

We communicate all the time, every day. Sometimes we're even aware of it! We communicate through gesture, body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice as well as through the words we speak. These variables can be joined in a variety of ways in our communication. Add to this mix: language; cultural and social differences; educational background; physical proximity; and individual fears, insecurities, strengths, and weaknesses. No wonder communication is complex! There is a huge amount of information on communication and different methodologies for improvement. The following offers one perspective on communication.

First of all, being successful in business requires effective communication. This paper focuses on effective business communication, although the information can be applied generally. To untangle the mix described above and to improve communication, we can focus on several key elements:

- Purpose
- Style
- Listening

Purpose

In business, when we communicate we usually have a purpose. Sometimes we have not considered that purpose sufficiently before beginning the dialogue, which can lead to confusion and mixed messages. So, first we must clarify our purpose. What do I want as a result of this communication? What would be a successful outcome?

As an example, let's consider dialogue with an employee regarding a new assignment. Initially, we may look at the assignment and consider that its successful completion is the purpose. But let's break this process further down into smaller steps, with handing off the assignment being the first step. Our desired outcome FOR THE MEETING to hand off the assignment might be:

- Employee fully understands the assignment
- Responds to questions to ensure understanding
- Is able to paraphrase assignment requirements
- Is aware of consequences of completing or not completing assignment

- Employee has an idea of how to proceed
- Articulates next steps
- Identifies problems, etc
- Or we and employee discuss together
- Employee knows resources available
- Employee knows where to go for help
- We and employee agree on a follow-up status check meeting

If we have been successful in this first communication regarding the assignment, we have already established a paradigm for communication during the assignment work, including follow-ups to check status, make corrections, and to compliment upon completion. Clarity in the initial communication makes a huge difference. And to back up one step, clarifying our purpose before starting the communication can separate effective communication from that which is unclear, does not have sufficient detail, leaves no room for questions or advice, or does not ensure the employee can gain access to sufficient resources.

A clearly identified purpose can mean the difference between success or failure, and while thinking through a purpose may take time initially, we will eventually form a consistent habit of clarifying desired outcome – which usually leads to better results.

Style

Style has to do with who we are and how who we are affects our communication. We may engage in dialogue with little knowledge of the impact of individual differences. Some of us may have a higher awareness of style differences and still not use this awareness when communicating. Others of us become aware of stylistic differences only when having a problem communicating. Let's stop for a moment and further define "style."

Style is influenced by many factors, some of which were defined at the beginning of this article. A longer list might include culture, upbringing, religion, gender, age, education, language, race, politics - and this is not a total list. Some of the influences of our early years are mitigated or enhanced during our growth and experience. In all, we become who we are, and who we are influences our communication.

Let's stay at this level of detail and agree that generally at work we do not sit down and tick off this list every time we communicate with someone! Then how do we overcome some of our differences in order to communicate effectively? We consider style: mine and theirs.

Some of us tend to be more direct and/or assertive, or even aggressive. Some of us tend toward being indirect and/or passive. Here are some characteristics of each type.

Direct and Assertive/Aggressive	Passive and Indirect
"Take charge" attitude; may have aggressive tendencies	More laid back tendency
May interrupt or tend to dominate the dialogue	May hesitate, wait to speak up, or have to be drawn out
Does not always seek dialogue; instead "tells" a lot	Lack of response does not necessarily indicate agreement or approval; has to be probed
Does not always see the other person's side; may be perceived as close-minded	Sometimes prefers for others to make decisions
May assume that passivity indicates agreement	Passive style may not indicate true feelings and attitudes
Non-verbal clues easier to detect since they are more openly expressed	Non-verbal clues follow passive characteristics and require more careful attention
Tends to decide or answer quickly	May need time rather than having to respond immediately

This simple table provides a general understanding of two basic styles. It's easy to see how communication may break down between these two types. Most of us do not easily fall into these simple categories but may have characteristics of each, which may change or vary on different days. All of this adds to the complexity of communications.

Having some knowledge of a person's style can help us. To try to break down the complexity we can use the elements in the table to formulate helpful questions, such as the following.

- Generally, what is his attitude: take charge or laid back?
- Does she comfortably engage in dialogue with others?
- Does he add comments and ask questions?
- Is it necessary to draw her out, to solicit her opinions?
- Does she listen to others or have a tendency to interrupt?

We can see how to use this style information to gain a better understanding of the person with whom we want to communicate. For example, if Sally's style is to be assertive or aggressive, she might have to work hard to hold back some of that take charge mentality and her tendency to speak up, dominate, and not read non-verbal clues. If Sally's style is passive and indirect she might have to make more effort to participate in a discussion, to voice her opinions or misgivings, and to ask questions.

It's easy to see how we can use this same information to gain more insight about our own style. After all, it takes at least two people to communicate and we are part of that formula. So we have to apply these questions to ourselves as well.

- Am I more aggressive or laid back?
- Do I ask questions of others?
- Is my tendency to accept in the moment then voice my opinions later?
- Do I consider other people's opinions, do I ignore their input, or do I just withdraw?

Once we've determined our style and the style of the other person, we have to consider the dynamic of the two. Two aggressive people may have to each work harder at allowing the other to talk and voice opinions. Two passive people may tend to come to conclusions too quickly, or may not uncover issues or differences. One of each will have to be very aware of the other's differences and make the effort required to accommodate those differences. Taking the time to think about our own style, then to consider the style of the other person, generates huge returns in communication. These returns include:

- Increased ability of the passive/indirect person to express
- Increased ability of the aggressive/direct person to listen
- Ability to allow and work out differences
- Realization that we each offer strengths as well as weaknesses
- Achieving more together than possible as individuals

Recognizing style or personal characteristics is key to successful business communications.

Listening

Active listening takes energy; it's work. To actively listen to someone means the following:

- Focus eyes and mind on the person speaking
- Indicate listening through eye contact, note taking, and body language
- Respond appropriately with comments, questions, or paraphrasing

The first step is the most difficult: focusing solely on the person speaking versus thinking of what we want to say next, beginning to analyze, or even coming up with a solution! We can minimize these tendencies by making good eye contact with the person speaking so that our focus is only on that person. Quelling the desire to analyze, problem solve, etc. means we have to WORK hard. It takes a strong effort to halt or slow down these urges. If we don't stop them, then our focus is not on the person but is on our own words and thoughts, and we are not getting all of the information they are telling us. Short circuiting active listening means we short circuit them and ourselves.

When this does happen and we're aware of it, we can stop the person and ask him or her to repeat what they said. We might say, "Would you please repeat that so I will have a full understanding," to cover our embarrassment for not listening!

Making eye contact with a person may depend upon style or culture. Some cultures prefer not to have direct eye contact. Our style assessment will help us to determine whether or not that is true for the person with whom we are dealing. Our assessment will also help us to establish which other mechanisms to use to indicate we are truly focused on what the person is saying.

Responding appropriately is a real indication of active listening. When we talk with teenagers we might ask them to repeat what we just said. If they repeat verbatim we know they heard us and can "parrot." If they paraphrase or explain what we said in their own words, we know they really listened and understood. The ability to paraphrase is a powerful tool to use with our fellow employees. If we have any doubt of their understanding, having them paraphrase is a good way to check it out.

Another appropriate response is to ask questions. If we are listening to the person, asking appropriate questions helps that person to know we are really listening. It works the other way as well. If an employee or colleague does not ask us questions or does not respond appropriately, we know we need to review again, repeat using different words, draw a diagram, or whatever else we need to do to help that person understand.

Active listening is not something we need to do all the time; in fact, we could not. What's important is to determine when to use active listening. A good measurement is to say that we should actively listen anytime not listening could result in damaging or hurtful consequences.

Summary

Behind our communication is a purpose. That purpose may be assigning a new task, asking an employee to solve a problem, or providing feedback on performance. Our next step is to understand style: that of the employee and our own, which helps us to modify our own style and better understand how to work with the employee's style. As we talk with the employee we can use active listening to ensure that we are getting complete information and to ensure the employee is listening to us. The next time we are ready to communicate let's make sure we do the following:

- Clarify purpose – what we want as a result of the communication
- Consider style, theirs and ours, to facilitate effective communications
- Make a conscious effort to actively listen

Clarity of purpose, identifying style, and active listening are tools to facilitate communication in any direction: with employees, with peers, and up the chain.

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